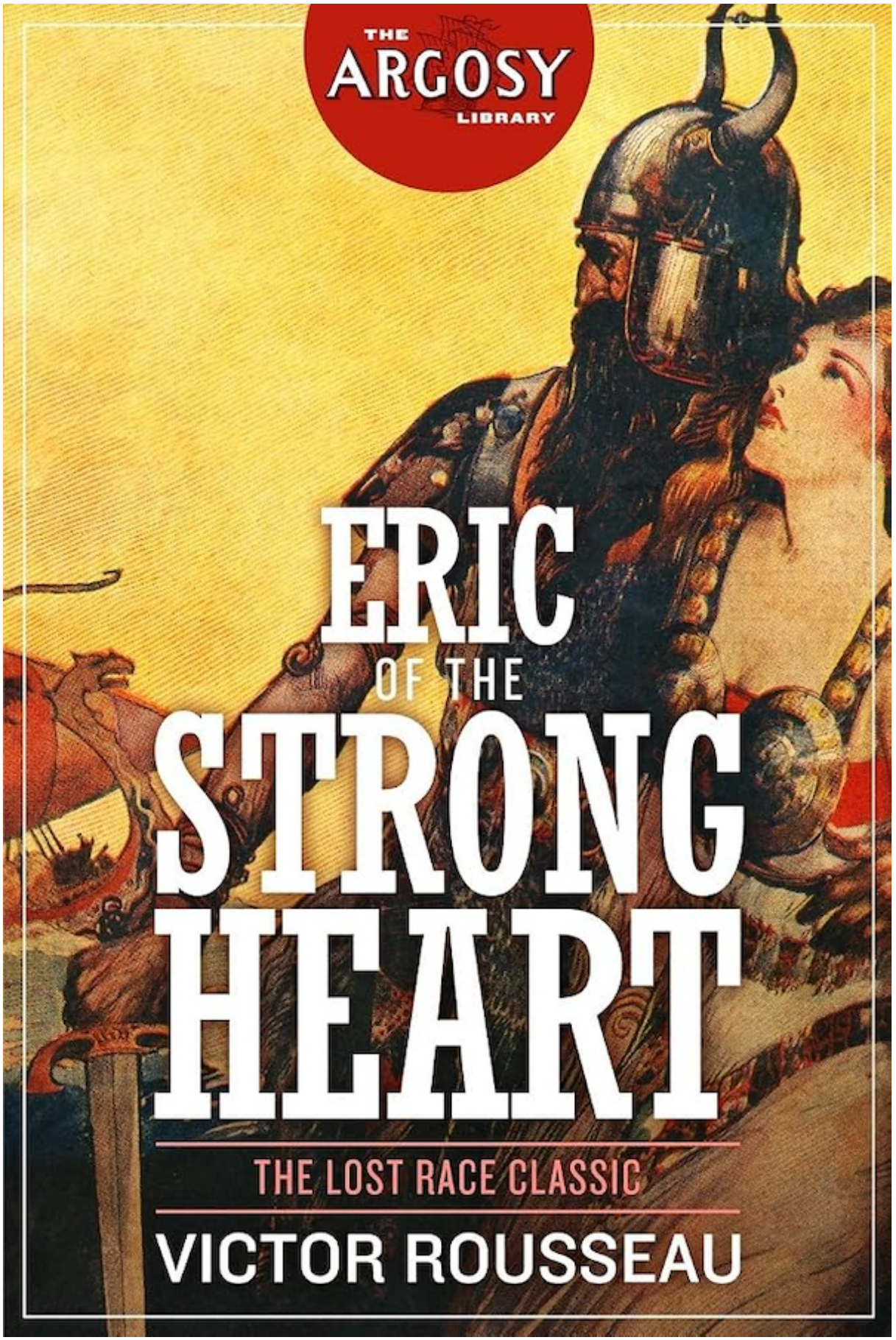
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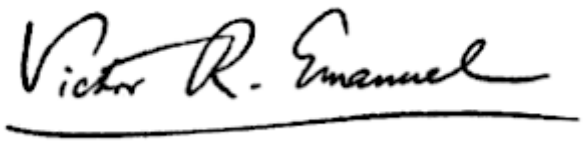

ERIC OF THE STRONG HEART

VICTOR ROUSSEAU

Eric of the Strong Heart

by Victor Rousseau

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ERIC OF THE STRONG HEART

CHAPTER I.

Eric Discovers Who He Is.

My name is Silverstein. Not a romantic one, and savoring rather of the commercial, than of the heroic, but I have always felt that it fitted me like a glove, for nobody could look less adventurous than I do.

Being cursed with a timidity which, to do myself what little justice is possible, comes rather from an inherited neurasthenia than from bodily shrinking from danger, I have always made other men my heroes and enjoyed my adventures in books, supplemented by an imaginative faculty that might have driven me into literature, but for the possession of moderate private means.

Physically, I never had much of a chance, but that was my mother's misfortune. She was the daughter of a learned man in Russia, who brought her to America at the beginning of the eighties.

I was born soon after, and I never knew my father's name.

But once, when I was a child, she showed me a paper, written all over in unreadable—to me—Russian characters; it was a marriage certificate, and she had borne the ignominy of shame rather than reveal to her father what would have killed him—her marriage to one not of her faith.

So my name is not really Silverstein after all; that was hers, the name she chose to live under and die with.

You will see from this that my mother was a woman of strong character. I owe her everything, except my means. That came from the unknown friends in Russia—my father's family, no doubt.

Rubles and rubles, hoarded away at interest in the bank, and all for me.

Thanks to this I went to the university, and there I discovered that, perhaps through my insignificance, I possessed the power of making friends.

Ralph Wiston was my best friend. He was interested, like me, in adventure, but, unlike me, he sought to translate it into action.

I had learned marvelous stories from my mother; tales of old Russia, and of the Norsemen who had given it its dynasty of Czars; of the band of adventurers who, rather than live tamely in a declining world, sailed away to

the far north to found new empires of the snow.

"Such a man," she told me, "was Leontieff."

I still wear on my finger the ring she gave me, with that name on it, in Russian script; gold, set with a single ruby.

She never knew that, thanks to a precocious acquisition of Greek, I had spelled out that name in the old Greco-Slav letters upon the marriage paper.

I knew who Leontieff was.

But my mother died when I was twelve, and all her stories faded into that background of childish memories that unconsciously influences our later lives.

I never told Ralph Wiston of Leontieff, though I told him almost everything else. I told him of Rangarok, the mysterious ice-city in the unknown island of the far north, such as the northern Russian peasants speak of to their children.

One day we were to go forth adventuring together. Perhaps we should find it.

He drifted into journalism, but still remained my friend.

He was a man much sought and admired.

Always impecunious, always in trouble, with hosts of connections, it was a marvel to me that my rooms near the Metropolitan Museum held any attention for him.

Yet he would come there, two or three evenings a week, tell me his troubles, and allow me the privilege of real friendship—I mean pecuniary assistance.

The growing debt never weakened our friendship, and I never gave it a thought.

And always, after I had changed his despair to joy, we would bring out the books and maps and pore over them, and wonder when we should start on our long-talked-of-journey to some strange part of the earth.

And always our thoughts came back to the mysterious, mythical Rangarok.

CHAPTER II

Eric Rescues a Princess.

YOU remember the Columbus caravels that drew such hosts of people to the harbor of New York a few years ago. They were sent about the country for show purposes, I believe, these reconstructions, and they got the habit of turning up unexpectedly until people lost interest in them.

I remembered a few lines in one of the evening newspapers, stating that one of these ships had docked at a pier abutting on the East River, and a satirical suggestion that the ingenuity of the press-agent, who had rented the crazy craft for the troupe of touring freaks was misapplied in jaded New York.

The perusal did not arouse my curiosity, and after I had concluded my evening's work upon my monograph dealing with early Norse inscriptions, I set out upon my regular constitutional—two miles downtown along any one of the avenues, and two miles back again—to prepare me for sleep.

I had turned down Third Avenue after crossing Union Square. I was thinking of the Saxon princess, Editha, and how she freed her people by handing Olaf the poisoned stirrup-cup, and I confess that the old story warmed my blood and brought back momentarily regrets that fate had given me such a body, and such nerves, and placed me in an environment so different from the one I would have chosen.

I must have gone further than I had intended, for when I regretfully dismissed the fancy from my mind I realized that my progress was blocked by a little crowd of people struggling to gain admittance to a dime museum.

Wedged in the crowd by the numbers that pressed me forward, I was temporarily unable to free myself, and was gradually forced up toward the entrance, where a "barker," as I believe this species is called, was shouting loudly, somewhat like this:

"Walk in, gents, and see the Sleeping Princess who's come all the way from Borneo, with her giant and her dwarf, upon a special mission to see the President! Only ten cents! One at a time, gents! Hey! Take this back to its own country!"

He flicked a Canadian ten-cent piece into the crowd, and in the momentary struggle to secure it I found myself jammed past the man and into the museum, from behind whose drawn curtain there came the hum and buzz of astonished voices.

In another moment I had passed through the curtains, and stood, overcome with astonishment at what I saw.

Upon a dais, at the end of the hall, stood the most wonderful girl that I have ever seen in my life.

She must have been about two or three and twenty, her skin was like milk and roses, and from under the amber comb that bound her forehead, skein upon skein of flaxen, golden hair rumbled down her back like a shining cascade.

She stood there upon the dais looking at the crowd in some uneasiness, as if the situation was both novel and unexpected to her.

And the first thought that came into my mind, as always when I saw or heard anything that stirred the imagination, was:

"I wish Ralph Wiston could see her!"

On either side of her stood an extraordinary figure, the sight of which at once recalled to my mind the paragraph in the evening paper.

One was a giant, of more than seven feet in height, dressed in a linen coat, sleeveless, petticoat of the same material, and sandals, and carrying a huge wooden club, studded with iron nails. He eyed the crowd with such ferocity that they had all edged toward the other side of the platform, where stood the dwarf.

The queerest, quaintest little old fellow that I have seen. He was perhaps four feet in height, and sixty years of age.

His white locks tumbled over his breast, his sparse, iron-gray beard mingled with them; and there was, on his wrinkled face, a look of sagacious study, as if he, too, did not quite take in the situation, but was determined to be friendly and diplomatic while taking his bearings.

What astonished me most, however, was the girl's dress, which I have not yet described. It was a perfect reproduction of the Saxon dress of the tenth century, even to certain little known details that are hardly ever reproduced, even in paintings.

It consisted of a well-fitting linen upper garment, surmounted with a leather corselet, reenforced with brass plates; the short kilt, also of leather, reached to the knee beneath which were tightly fitting leather gaiters; and

there were two tiny feet incased in shoes of finest leather, marvelously tanned, looking soft as fine silk and stout as moccasins.

The girl stood facing the gaping crowd, and jeers and tittering broke out.

"Beauty and the beasts!" shouted one wit.

"Aw, give the dame a chanst!" yelled another. "Say somethin', lady!"

The girl came forward to the edge of the platform with arms extended, bare to the elbows. A few words, incomprehensible to her auditors, came from her lips.

But I was reeling backward in amazement, and my jangling nerves were quivering like the cords of an unstrung mandolin. The words she spoke were in an Anglo-Saxon dialect of the tenth century!

"Kind friends," she had said, "pray tell me whether this is truly the palace of the ruler of your country, or whether I have misunderstood, for, truly, your speech, though it rings familiarly upon my ears, is difficult of comprehension."

There she was, speaking a tongue strangely familiar and yet utterly incomprehensible to that mob, as if a child uttered a long harangue in its own imitative language.

And then, mastered by a sudden inexplicable impulse—for, ordinarily, nothing could have induced me to make a speech before a crowd—I strode forward.

"I speak your language, lady," I said, "but will you not first tell me your name and rank?"

A happy smile came over her face.

"I am the Princess Editha," she answered, "daughter of the *eorl* Theobald, king by choice of the North Anglian land."

And, with that, I forgot the crowd and was aware only of her presence, and of that of the giant, scowling at me with his ferocious mien, and of the sage dwarf, whose wrinkled features were alight with a grimacing smile.

"Surely some witchcraft has brought you here, O princess," I answered.

Think of that speech from Eric Silverstein, New York bred, and knowing every street and avenue, and almost every shop in them with his eyes shut!

"For this is not the palace of our king, and, truly, we are a folk without a king, but governed by wise men of our own choosing. This is a place where things curious and strange are held up to the examination of the rabble of our city, who pay a small price for the enjoyment."

If I had had any self-consciousness I should have been appalled by the confusion that my words created. For the girl, flushing indignantly, swung round on her small shoes and nodded to the dwarf, who instantly threw about her something that I had not seen before—a cloak of richest ermine, with a great collar of fox or marten skin.

"Come, Egbert, let us return to our longboat," she said indignantly.

Then I came back to myself, to find that I was the center of the indignant crowd's interest.

"Say, what d'you mean by busting up my show?" demanded the irate proprietor, striding forward from the foot of the dais, and shaking his fist in my face angrily.

"What you been saying to her? Come back, lady! It's all right, lady!"

"Soak the gink!" yelled an infuriated spectator near me.

Sticks and fists were raised threateningly, but I was only half conscious of them.

It is not often that a man sees the dream of his secret life embodied in warm flesh and blood before him.

I pushed my way forward until I stood beside the girl, who was nervously fastening the cloak about her throat with a great clasp of beaten gold.

"This lady says it's a mistake!" I cried, turning upon the crowd. "She didn't know this was a museum."

"Ain't my show as good as Barnum's?" shouted the proprietor, keyed up to desperation by the fear of losing his drawing-card. "Say! I got a contract, and I guess she'll keep it, or it 'll cost her a cool fifty thousand. Tell her that, Clarence!"

(I have frequently been addressed by this name before; I understand that it is indicative of contempt among a certain class of the populace.)

For a moment longer the girl's fingers trembled at her throat; and then she stood-up like a splendid lioness, and looked so haughtily at the crowd that they, taking it for a continuance of the play-acting, broke into a storm of applause.

I offered her my arm. I had some vague idea of protecting her, of finding her and her companions shelter; she smiled at me, but I don't think she would have taken it.

Quietly she stepped off the dais, and instantly the mob's mood changed

again to fury. They surged about us.

And suddenly the princess seemed to become obsessed with royal indignation.

"Now play the man, Knut!" she cried to the giant. "Teach this low rabble such a lesson that it will be long before they again insult an *eorl's* daughter!"

Then, to my astonishment, the ferocious giant, letting his great club trail to the ground and casting terrified glances about him, ran, sobbing and cringing, behind his mistress for protection.

The huge man was an arrant coward, and the contrast between his great bulk and his little spirit so amused the crowd that they momentarily forgot their threatening attitude and intentions.

Seizing this opportunity, I placed my hand on the girl's arm, and hurried her toward the entrance, the dwarf, Egbert, whose courage compensated fairly well for his lack of stature, strutting sagely in front of us, and addressing the mob benignly, gesticulating and uttering a flow of unintelligible language that convulsed them with laughter.

We were nearing the door when the proprietor, forcing his way in front of us dealt me a blow that sent me spinning backward, at the same time catching Editha rudely about the shoulders and trying to force her back toward the dais.

At that something awakened in me that I had never known before. As I regained my balance I saw Knut at my side, slobbering and mouthing with terror. The spiked club dangled between his nerveless fingers.

I snatched it from him and, raising it, dealt the owner a blow between the shoulders that sent him tumbling head over heels among the crowd.

I don't know what happened in the next few seconds, except that somehow we three had gained the street, and were standing there, under the Bowery lights, and I was swinging the heavy club round and round my head with a strength that I had never thought I possessed.

Some quickness of wit was born in me, too, for I realized that our position there was hardly better than within. People were running up from all sides.

I saw a street-car approaching, the motorman clanging his bell to clear his way, and, catching the girl's hand, I hurried her toward it.

The quick-witted dwarf, grasping the hand of the giant, which he could only reach by extending himself on tiptoes, so that he assumed a ludicrously waddling posture, ran with us.

Somehow I had swung the girl aboard, and our companions had followed, and the car was moving slowly through the mob that surged about us. Presently we were clear of them and running toward the Battery.

I had paid no attention to the grins of the other passengers, who evidently saw nothing extraordinary in the mobbing of a party of circus-freaks; but now I began to reflect hastily what should be done.

To seek shelter at any hotel was manifestly out of the question, and I did not know how to place myself in communication with the enterprising showman who had brought this strange trio from some little-known Scandinavian settlement, as I imagined it to be. But just as my doubts began to arise they were dispelled by the girl, who turned to me and said, smiling:

"This way lies our long-boat, O sheriff! Accept, then, the thanks of Editha, the princess, who will not forget to speak favorably of you to the wise men of your witan when they come to pay me their ceremonial visit to-morrow. And, as for the insults of your *theows*—slaves—be assured that no punishment need be inflicted on them."

You see, she took me for the sheriff, or *shire-reeve*, from the fact that I had assumed, in her eyes, some administrative or judicial function.

It was hopelessly baffling, but at the moment I could not stop to puzzle out what isolated community could have retained the old Anglian speech and customs in their entirety. I knew that there were strange settlements off Norway and the outer Hebrides.

All I was thinking of at that moment was how to get the party aboard the Columbus caraval, where, I began to imagine I should find the showman from whom they had run away.

The conductor, understanding the girl's gesture, stopped the car. We got off at an almost deserted side street. One or two of our fellow passengers who had alighted showed a disposition to follow us, but I led the three quickly down the street toward the water-front until we reached a little quay, which I recognized as one owned by a semi-moribund fruit company, and generally empty. And here, looming up out of the night, I saw the outlines of the caraval.

CHAPTER III.

The Princess's Mission.

BUT when we reached the end of the short dock I saw that the vessel that lay there was not a caravel. It was smaller by many tons' burden. In fact, it could not have been of more than sixty tons displacement, but it was so skillfully built that I stood for a few moments marveling at its construction.

There were two masts, lateen-rigged, the triangular sails flaring and bellying from the long, tapering yards as the little craft strained at the ropes which held her to the iron pins. The stern was high and the prow absurdly high and both were decked; the center was open, with high sides, as was inevitable if she was to ride out even a moderate storm.

Yet, so far as I could ascertain in the darkness, the breadth of beam was not disproportionate; and the vessel left the impression, curiously, considering her build, of tapering slimness, as if some master-hand had drawn her lines.

As we halted a moment at the wharf's edge, Knut, the giant, suddenly lifted up his voice and sang.

The immense volume of the chant that burst from his throat rolled away across the river, a deep, sweep bass, such as many an operatic singer would have given his eyes for.

"Hark, folk!" he chanted. "I am Knut the Brave. With my right hand, wielding my club Knaveslayer, this night have I saved my beloved princess from wrong at the hands of the base-born *theows.*

"Heed, ye people! Knut is among you, Knut, the ox-slayer—"

"Be silent, Knut!" commanded the princess.

Knut, abashed, dropped his raised club upon the wooden pier with a thud that made the flimsy structure quiver.

The Princess Editha turned toward me and held out her hand with a royal gesture. I was uncertain whether I should take it or raise it to my lips, but I understood the movement to be significant of farewell. But at that moment the dwarf Egbert intervened.

"Enter our long-boat, worthy sheriff," he said. "It may be that, as a poor

return for your courtesy, I may be permitted to show you our vessel, and to inquire what manner of vessels are in use in the navy of this country.

"For truly we have seen your carriages that move without horses, and floating palaces such as we never dreamed of in Rangarok—"

I felt my heart beating as if it was going to burst my side as he said that.

"And we know well that you are learned in all the magic of the Byzantines and the Persians, whereas, we are poor, ignorant folk, although our city is no mean one.

"Besides—" he ended with his mouth close to my ear— "I want to have a word with you."

Editha smiled, but as if I were miles away from her. She inclined her head, and, as Egbert stepped aside, tripped lightly along the plank that led down into the ship's hold, and we three followed her.

As we entered I became aware of two stalwart figures, with long bows and sheaves of arrows hanging from their girdles, which rose silently out of the gloom of the hold and took their place, each at a little platform built within the ship's side, from which they could scan the pier and its approaches.

We followed along the bottom of the ship toward the forecastle. The giant drew aside a richly woven curtain, and I found myself in a little room, evidently that of the princess's.

It was Spartan in its simplicity. There was a mattress upon the planks, stuffed with some aromatic grasses, a silver ewer and laver, two or three small flasks of the same metal, containing, I imagine, toilet preparations; a shelf with parchment books bound in dyed sheepskins; a heap of rushes on which, as soon as the girl had taken her seat, the giant and the dwarf squatted and folded their hands over their knees. I followed suit, finding the posture much more uncomfortable than they did.

And slowly I was coming to the realization that there was no showman at all!

Who were these apparitions from another world that had appeared in their ancient ship in New York's river? I wondered if it was all a dream. I felt hot and cold all over. I was afraid.

And then I realized that the princess was speaking.

"Tell me your name, O sheriff," she was asking me in her melodious North Anglian.

I hesitated.

"Eric," I answered.

And then, remembering my mother, "Silverstein."

"Eric, of the Silver Stone," she answered, musing. "A memorable name, and one that doubtless has notable associations. My name you already know. This is my counselor, Egbert; that, my protector, Knut."

The tinge of irony in her words was lost on the giant. He sprang to his feet, club uplifted.

"I am Knut, the protector of my princess," he roared, "I am Knut the Terrible, the Feared—"

"Sit down, *eorl*, and let others sing thy praises," said the princess.

"Now, Eric, since your witan has not yet been apprized of my coming, and made plans to welcome me, it is meet that you should know the purpose of my visit here.

"Shall I speak, O Egbert?" she continued, looking at the dwarf.

The old man nodded his gray head vigorously.

"It is meet that he should know. O princess," he answered, "since the old legend hath it that an Eric shall restore the fallen fortunes of our people."

"And for that purpose came we forth, but not to meet this Eric," she answered. "Know, then, that my father, Theobald, elected king over Rangarok, resolved to save his folk from the oppression of the cruel Norsemen, who have long tyrannized over us. Yet, if the name of Rangarok is not familiar to you, I will begin further back, and recount briefly our folk's history.

"You must know that, according to the records of our sages, we were once a great people in Angle Land. In times long past, having gone forth upon a foray, our king returned, to find that his realm had been sacked by the Danes, his cities burned, his fields devastated, and his women carried away.

"He swore by the White Christ that he would never live a slave under our enemies, and, gathering his warriors and taking maidens with him, to be wives to them, he sailed into the far north until he reached a realm beyond the reach of his enemies.

"There he built Rangarok, and the city grew and flourished. But his folk always remembered their vow never to live again among men of alien races.

"Long afterward a descendant of the Norsemen, who had rejected the Christian faith, resolved, too, to seek out a land where he could live unmolested, worshiping his heathen gods and plundering his neighbors, as he

had been wont to do. He, too, came north, and, finding Rangarok, seized it, and made it his capital city.

"Since then the two races have dwelt together; the Danes as masters, we as slaves. And ever the ruling chiefs have taken unto themselves as wives the daughters of the Saxon chiefs. Shall I speak on, Egbert?"

"Speak on, princess," answered the dwarf, fixing his shrewd eyes upon me.

"But when I looked into the face of Harald Deerfoot, upon our wedding eve," she continued, "I knew that death would be far dearer to me than such a marriage. Upon that eve, while he was still drinking with his vassals in the halls of the palace in Rangarok, I stole away, accompanied by these two faithful followers, to where our long-boat lay, stocked with provisions, on the seashore.

"For many moons we sailed westward, hoping to find at last the land of Vineland, settled in the long ago by Eric the Red, a Norseman who had once been in alliance with our Anglian folk.

"But when at last we sighted land, with our provisions all but gone, it proved an uninhabited and desolate shore.

"Thence we came southward along the coast, passing many populous cities, and great ships. And often we would have landed, but I grew afraid, thinking that the magic of the Byzantines was upon the land, and we went ashore only at night, by stealth, to procure water and tamed fowls from villages.

"At last we reached this lordly harbor, and here we landed, knowing that if this was not Vineland, then we should never find it.

"And it was my purpose to disclose my mission to your king, and to seek his aid against Harald, the oppressor of my people, and to deliver my father from his tyranny. But since you have no king, but only a witan, where, as I know, wise men do babble and come to no agreement, it is my purpose to return northward, and perchance seek out some other land where the descendants of Eric may yet live.

"And so I shall set sail at dawn, without awaiting your witan, for I think you are not well-bred people, that you expose strangers in public places, to make mock of them, and provide no welcome for them."

Her eyes flashed, and she looked at me angrily as she spoke.

"Truly, your decision is a wise one, O princess," answered Egbert. "And yet, methinks, it were not wise to permit Eric to return to his city, since he

might send ships of Byzantine magic after us, such as consume smoke and are never satisfied, and move at a prodigious rate against the wind over the water. What chance should we have to escape capture, and perhaps enslavement?"

"This I have thought," she answered in meditation, fixing her blue eyes upon me.

I spoke up.

"O princess," I said, "I am no sheriff, but one without employment or ties of kin, and gladly would I return with you to Rangarok, and teach your folk the learning of my folk.

"But one thing I would crave. I have a friend whom I would bring with me. Grant that I may go for him, and in two hours I shall return with him; meanwhile make ready to sail."

"What is his name?" she asked, bending her brows upon me.

"Ralph," I answered.

And at that instant I registered a determination, fantastic as it may sound, that Ralph should become the husband of this glorious woman, who seemed to me the realization of all my dreams.

Ralph and the Princess Editha! Who would want to return to his own land with such a bride? And how could I better repay him for his unwavering friendship?

The thought went to my head and made me dizzy with joy.

"Is he a young man, and fair to look upon, or such as you, Eric?" she asked.

"He is the handsomest man that I have known, the best friend, and the most loyal," I answered.

She smiled faintly, and I saw her toying with a little silver-hilted dagger that I had not noticed before.

"I am interested in your friend, Ralph," she answered after a pause. "Not that I care whatever his age or looks may be. But I would see what sort of man has chosen you as his friend, Eric.

"Go, then, and bring him. But first pledge yourself by the Holy Book that, except to Ralph, no word of this meeting of ours shall pass your lips."

"So I pledge myself," I answered, and rose, bowing toward her.

But she extended her hand.

"Come hither, Eric," she said, and as I approached she laid it on my

head.

"Kneel," she continued. "Kneel and pledge yourself to my service. For, if you are not fair to look on, you are the man whom women trust.

"I feel that. And know that my protection shall always be upon you, and never harm shall come to you from me."

She nodded in dismissal, and lay back on the mattress, drawing the folds of her ample ermine cloak about her. The dwarf and giant rose, the latter capering out into the hold, chuckling some fragment of a song. But as soon as we were outside old Egbert pinched me by the arm.

"There is one thing that you must see before you go, Eric," he said.

I followed him toward the roofed place in the stern, whither the giant had preceded us. In passing the two bowmen, Egbert half halted and whispered something that I failed to catch.

Then we passed into a room of the same size as Editha's, except for the tapering end, but very different.

It was the galley. Great water-casks stood on the floor, there were the embers of a large fire in an iron grate, there were copper utensils, and from a cask of pickles the snout and eyes of a pig, procured Heaven knows how, protruded with sage indifference.

There was a barrel of flour, bearing the stamp of a Minnesota firm, and there were bunches of bananas and dried fruits, no doubt purloined along the water-front.

Two heaps of rushes and two coarsely woven blankets indicated where my strange companions slept.

The giant, seating himself upon a wooden stool, took up a brass dish full of cold porridge and began eating with a wooden spoon in the greediest manner, totally indifferent to our presence.

"Have no fear of that fool," said old Egbert in contempt. "O Eric, listen to me. I brought you here on board, because it is not meet that you should return and utter words which will betray the princess to the base folk of this land.

"Neither is it fitting that her freedom should be endangered. Therefore it is my plan to hide you here, where she will never come until we have reached, on our northward voyage, the last settlement of the folk of your land.

"There you shall be set ashore with honor and valuable gifts. What say you?"

“Has not the princess already spoken?” I asked.

“True. But know, O Eric, that when the ruler is a woman, and young, she commands, but her counselors interpret her words as suits them best.

“Therefore I say you shall be hidden here, and fear nothing. Besides, it is now too late, for there is no possibility of returning.”

And even as he spoke I felt the ship move, pitch, and begin to glide from her moorings.

The shrewd old rascal must have given his instructions to the two archers in passing them.

It was not anger that I felt so much as chagrin at the thought that Ralph would never see Editha now, never go adventuring with me to Rangarok, there to become the husband of its princess.

Heaven knows what I thought. I was not in my normal mind that night.

“See!” said old Egbert, leading me to the entrance.

We were sweeping down the East River under the wind, the sails bellying above us. And, indeed, it was impossible to escape, unless I could see Editha and tell her of this treachery.

A long time must have passed, for already the first streaks of red were in the sky, and it was quite light. Despair maddened me.

I must have showed my intentions in my eyes, for the dwarf, looking at me intently, and with a certain shrewd kindliness laid his hand on my arm.

“Before you act, listen one minute, O Eric,” he said. “Wise men know how to accept situations. I come from a land unversed in your Byzantine magic; and yet my wisdom has been acquired by many years of observation. If you enter the room of the Princess Editha you go to your death.”

I laughed him to scorn, I flung away his hand, and crossed the hold. The dwarf, chattering, ran by my side. He caught me amidships.

“O Eric, you are mad, not to listen to me!” he cried. “If I deceived you, it was for the safety of my mistress. Now I speak the truth; if you lean on her, you lean on a sharp thorn that will pierce you.

“She has already forgotten—she will feel only anger—Eric, hear me—go, then, and die!”

I thought his words were the ravings of a man whose petty trick had failed. I paid no heed to them. I hurried past the silent archers, who watched me without movement, and went on to the curtain.

As I reached it I saw the red rim of the sun rise out of the bay. And I

heard the slightest stir within.

Then, drawing it back, I saw the princess on her feet. She had thrown off her ermine cloak and stood motionless as a statue, her arms held out before her, and the look on her face was that of one struggling against the power of some deadly evil.

She made so superb a picture as she stood there in her white blouse and leather kilt, her long, unbound hair streaming behind her, that I could hardly repress a cry of admiration. And I resolved more than ever that Ralph should win this wonderful woman from her far and strange country.

Then fear began to creep upon me. For the eyes, which had been expressionless, began to clear and the look in them was no longer of kindly condescension and royal good will, but of something evil.

And as I watched the eyes, which fixed themselves upon me without seeming to be aware of my presence, I saw this evil spirit that possessed her leap into my life and gather up the reins of guidance and control. The blue eyes became those of a devil.

The statue changed to flesh and blood as swiftly as a still horse gathers the bit and leaps into activity. She knew me now. With a low cry of malicious joy she leaped at me, lithe as a cat, and in her hand I saw the silver dagger.

CHAPTER IV.

Under Haggudra's Spell.

SO swift and unexpected was her rush that I had barely time to evade it. But I make up in activity for what I lack in strength, and I dipped beneath the flashing blade, which cleaved the air harmlessly. Then, catching her about the arms, I fought for life with all the panic-born strength of one who is a coward by nature.

But even my strength, and the despair of one in whom the sight of a naked knife evokes ancestral memories of unimaginable horror, hardly sufficed to save me. I shouted wildly for Egbert, but there came no answer. And in the little cabin we two wrestled together.

I had her right arm under mine, and in this position she was powerless to strike, and as we fought I kept begging her to remember me, telling her my name, reminding her of her gracious offer of protection. But my words were unmeaning to her, and the terrible, choking laughter that came in insane bursts from her lips was almost as unmanning as the ferocity of our struggle.

For it was the laughter of a devil, and of one who knows himself to be the master.

We wrestled all round the cabin. And I forgot that she was a woman, feeling nothing but the presence of that evil thing which had possession of her, and I bruised and pommeled her, and drove my fists into her body, in my mad fear of the knife, but she seemed unconscious of blows that should have stunned her. For a few minutes I held my own, for we were well matched, strength to strength, or rather, fury against fear.

Then, with an unexpected movement, she flung her arms about me and locked them tightly, and held me in a grip that was unshakable. She bent me back—for I was no taller than she—and flung her knife-hand over my shoulder.

I managed to reach up one arm and catch her wrist just in time, but only in time, for the flat of the dagger-blade grazed my neck. And for some terrible moments I held her thus, and felt her smooth wrist and forearm wriggling like a snake against my neck, and the blade-point searching for a

spot between the vertebrae in which to be driven home.

She had the reach, but I had her fingers twisted so that the flat blade could not be turned edgewise. I saw the look of triumph upon her face, and knew that it was a matter of a few moments longer.

With a deft twist I escaped her and, leaping at her, gripped her by both hands, and forced her backward against the wall of the heaving cabin.

She spat at me like a wildcat, shrieking and clawing at me and, balked in her first attempt, began to mouth vile oaths in her own tongue, and hideous blasphemies, invoking the heathen gods of the long dead past.

"Unhand me, dog of a Christian, and I will make of thee a skull for Woden's warriors to drink from!" she raved. "I will cut thy body to strips, and I will dismember thee, and feed thine offal to the carrion crow. Yea, I will fling thy limbs before the mother who bore thee, and bid her gather them to her bosom!"

And much more, cursing me by Loki, and his pale daughter, Hel, and the wolf, Fenrir, bound with the fetter Gleipnir, made out of the footfall of cats, the breath of fishes, and the teeth of birds.

And, forcing me backward, she bent me until I felt the muscles of my loins crack under the pressure.

I could not help but give before the superhuman strength that animated her and, wrenching her wrist free, she thrust the dagger with all its force against my side.

It struck the little pad of notes on early Norse inscriptions that I carried in my pocket, on which to jot down new ideas that came to me in the course of my evening walks.

The blade-point penetrated to the cardboard back, but stuck there, and inflicted only the slightest scratch on me. Yet, such was the force of the blow that the little dagger, deflected and glancing downward, passed clean through the slack of my coat, belt and all, and became embedded in the lining, and it was not until afterward that I discovered it there.

Again, we wrestled, and I, not knowing that she had lost the dagger, collected all my, strength with a last effort of will, and grappled with her.

We fought thus, knee to knee and shoulder to shoulder, her breath hot on my face, and venom on her tongue, and baleful flashes in her blue eyes that sickened me with fear. And then, of a sudden, the little vessel entered Buttermilk Channel at the East River's mouth, and a sudden roll sent me spinning through the curtains into the hold without.

As I stumbled and tried to rise I had a momentary vision of her running at me like a fury, with hands outstretched and fingers like a beast's claws; and then the dwarf Egbert had stridden forward and interposed his squat body between us.

She would not strike him, but tried to pass him, and he deftly intervened his body, always yielding place, but never suffering her to reach me, while she screamed like a demented woman until a sudden sign—I think it was of the cross—made by the little old man's hands, reduced her to comparative calm. Her body shook as if she was being torn to pieces, but she did not move.

"I conjure you to leave her, thou spirit of hell," said the old man, and muttered some formula in Norse, so ancient that I could not grasp its meaning. And then, stooping down and taking a piece of chalk from his pouch, he proceeded quietly to draw a rough circle about her.

He stepped back, and at once, as if the spell had been removed, she leaped at me again. But as her foot came in contact with the chalk-line she recoiled as though it were a white-hot wire.

Writhing and twisting and still clawing the air, she could not cross the ring.

Egbert turned toward me and nodded his gray beard sagaciously.

"O Eric, I warned you, but in truth you would not heed me," he said. "Now my heart misgives me, for verily, if I conceal you here, as was my plan, she will remember you when the madness comes on her again, and will seek you before another day is come.

"Even the wisest counselor is helpless before the fury of a devil-ridden woman. Yet, to kill an unarmed man would be against the teachings of our holy men, and blood must not be shed unjustly. Pledge yourself then that when you are gone from here, no word of this night's doings shall cross the gateway of your lips."

"Shoot him through the heart, archers." shrieked the princess, "that I may hang his corpse mast-high upon our long-boat as a sacrifice to the gods!"

One of the two archers, who were seated at the tiller, rose and came forward; fingering his bow loosely and looking uncertainly from the princess to the dwarf.

"Dost thou not know that between dawn and sundown she may no longer be obeyed?" demanded the dwarf sternly.

"Aye, master, but I am pledged to obey the behests of my princess."

answered the man calmly, beginning to string his bow and fit an arrow against the notch.

For a second the dwarf hesitated. And it seemed to me that the archer certainly meant business. Everybody on board seemed to understand the situation, and the princess, still shrieking at me, perturbed nobody.

Egbert turned toward me again, interposing his body between mine and the archer, who, having fitted his arrow, was trying to aim at me without hitting the dwarf.

"This thing was fated," said the little man. "Also it has been revealed to me that no harm shall come to you this night.

"Yet, since man is mightier than the gods, inasmuch as he can even change his destiny, forebear to follow what your heart will urge you to do to-morrow. Otherwise there will come bitter sorrows."

He muttered a few words to the giant, whose great bulk rose up from the deck behind me. And before I had understood Knut, with a shout, had caught me round the body and leaped with me into the sea.

A cry burst from my lips, for I was helpless in the giant's clutch. I felt his arms about me, and the swift rush of the water over my head. Down we went, until it seemed as if we must touch bottom.

I gasped for air; my lungs were cracking; and then I felt myself mounting upward, and in the light of the sun, just over the horizon, I saw that I was not more than two hundred yards from the Battery, and Knut was swimming like a fish, carrying me securely held against his mighty shoulder.

Onward we shot until the Battery wall appeared immediately before us. I saw a little rusty ladder hanging down into the water.

Knut swam toward it, placed my hands upon it, and, assuring himself that I was safely landed, turned with a whoop of joy, and began to swim rapidly back toward the long-boat, now little more than a speck, tacking and careening between the Brooklyn and the Staten Island shores.

Exhausted, dripping, miserable, and utterly unnerved, I sat upon the Battery wall and watched the bobbing head as it disappeared among the waves toward the vessel, until it was out of sight. And still I sat there, till the little boat was nothing but a sail, no larger than a seagull's wing.

"Been taking a swim, sonny?" asked a voice beside me.

I started, to see a patrolman standing by me. He was looking at me kindly, and uncertainly, as if in doubt whether I had met with an accident or fallen into the bay.

I think he concluded after a moment of inspection, that I had been drinking; indeed, my appearance was that of a castaway, and the water had formed a pool all about me.

"Got any home?" he asked. "Good! Beat it. I've been up against it myself. Here!"

He fished a quarter out of his pocket. I took it mechanically; I hardly knew what I was doing just at that time, though reality was struggling back into my brain, and the events of the night already seemed like drug visions.

"Did you see the boat?" I asked. "The dwarf and the giant and the princess with the long hair?"

You see, I wanted just then to assure myself that it was reality. But the man gripped me hard by the arm and pointed toward the Elevated.

"Beat it!" he commanded. "And don't let me see you round here again."

So I made my way stiffly toward the "L," feeling the premonitory twinges of rheumatism already in my limbs and, stared at by the ticket-chopper, and eyed askance by the trainmen, I succeeded in reaching the nearest station to my rooms, and then my rooms themselves, without more than a few dubious glances from people on the street.

A light was burning in my rooms. I opened the door, which I had left unlocked, and saw Ralph Wiston, fast asleep upon my bed, in evening clothes. Upon the floor was his suit-case.

He started up as I entered, yawned, and looked at me with a queer smile.

"Hello, Eric!" he said. "What's the matter? Fall into the river?"

I nodded; I was hardly ready for speech just then.

"Take a drink of brandy, man! It's a good thing I left a little at the bottom of your bottle. I'm in trouble, Eric; I came round to see you about it last night, and must have fallen asleep.

"What's the time? Seven o'clock? Where have you been all night?"

I poured out all that remained of the brandy and took a stiff drink to still my chattering teeth.

"Ralph," I said, "I've had the most wonderful adventure in the world. But I'll get into some dry clothes, and in the mean time tell me what's your trouble."

"Just darned luck, Eric, old man," he answered. "I'm up against it. You know that check I was expecting, with which I was to square myself, and pay you off—"

"Don't bother about that, Ralph," I answered.

"But I hate to be indebted to you in this way, Eric, old chap," he protested. "And I did hope to get straightened out. Well, the deal fell through at the last moment, and they're all coming down on me for money, and I've been put out of my place, and—well, the fact is, I've nowhere to go.

"It isn't a few dollars I've got to raise this time, it's two hundred and fifty. Of course I'm not going to ask your help after all you've done for me, but I was desperate, and I wanted to tell you what I was up against, because I value your sympathy, Eric, old man."

"And you have nowhere to go?" I asked, overcome by my friend's story. "But of course you can get lodgings somewhere, and there will be your salary from the paper."

"My dear boy, I lost my job two months ago," he answered. "The fact is, I didn't want to worry you with the story, because I knew how you'd feel about it. Henderson gave me a raw deal, just because I fell down on an assignment. That was when I borrowed the fifty."

"Oh, please don't make any reference to that," I answered. "I shall never forget your coming to me, because that's the real test of friendship. And I'm going to help you."

"Eric, old man, you're a trump," he answered, giving me one of those hand-clasps that seemed to convey all the heart and personality of the man. "I'll never forget it.

"But I can't take two hundred and fifty. At least—"

"My dear Ralph," I said, "I'm not going to give it to you."

His jaw fell.

"Eh—what?" he exclaimed.

"Ralph, I've thought a good deal about you, and it's my belief there are more practical ways of helping you. Of course, it is only you I'm thinking of, and not the money. But you ought to put your affairs on a practical basis."

"Oh, can that sort of talk, Eric," he interrupted. "Honestly, I didn't think you'd hand me out that line of argument. If I've made a mistake, I'm sorry."

He made a movement toward his suitcase. He had misunderstood me. I ran toward him, and caught him by the arm.

"You've interpreted what I was saying wrong," I told him. "I'm sorry, I was so clumsy. It's a delicate matter, and—"

"Precisely, Eric. It hurts a good deal, you know," he answered.

“Sit down and listen! I’m going to give you enough to pay every debt you have. But I want you to promise to pay them all and not keep anything back for the future.

“Because you’re going to accept a new position—from me. A hundred a month—not too much—but all found; and it may last forever.”

He sat down and measured me with his eyes; I was incoherent with excitement, and have no doubt my words were gibberish to him.

“Old man, you’ve had a wetting,” he said. “How did it happen? You’d better go to bed, and I’ll send round a doctor.

“As for the check—I’ll promise to pay out every cent of it, and we’ll let that wait, although, of course, the trouble will be on my mind until it’s settled. But it’s you I’m thinking of just now.”

I hardly heard his words.

“Ralph,” I said, “I’ve had a message from Rangarok.”

“From where?” he asked. “Oh, that place! Yes? Tell me about it”

Struggling into my dry clothes, I narrated to him the events of the evening. He listened quietly as I spoke—that was his way; but his look was one of incredulity.

“The most wonderful girl you ever set eyes on, Ralph,” I told him. “You’ll fall in love with her at first sight. Only—”

And even in my enthusiasm something kept me from telling him of that grim struggle with her at sunrise.

“And you say the giant pitched you into the water?” he demanded. “And swam ashore with you? My dear chap, do you honestly mean that, or—”

“I swear it!” I cried; and then I realized that he had not believed a word from the beginning. And I turned cold in the reaction of my own doubts.

And as I picked up my water-dripping coat, something fell from it and tinkled upon the floor. It was the princess’s dagger. I held it up triumphantly.

“I brought this back with me,” I said.

He looked at it, stifling a yawn, and then I could see that his own interest was becoming aroused. We took it beneath the light.

It was a beautiful specimen of work. The little blade was of the finest steel, and so flexible that it could almost have been bent upon itself.

The handle was of plain silver, and the steel had been annealed to it by some process; I knew that the annealing of silver and iron had been known to the Anglo-Saxons, but it was not that that caused me to cry out in sudden

ecstasy.

Ralph looked up at me, startled. But I held out the dagger under his eyes.

"Look at the symbol!" I shouted. "The serpent swallowing its tail! Can't you see it?"

"It's been rubbed down—the knife must be a hundred years old—but there it is! Now look when the light falls on it. Do you know what that means?"

"You've got me, Eric," said Ralph gravely.

"It's a Phoenician symbol of eternity, brought by the tin-traders to the British Isles before the time of Caesar. It's older than history.

"And it's still to be seen on cromlechs in the Hebrides and Shetlands. That's where that knife comes from. That gives me my clue.

"Ralph, we're going to find that girl and Rangarok, if we devote all the rest of our lives to it. And that's the meaning of the position I offered you. I'm going to sell all I have and fit out a yacht and go to Rangarok."

"My dear Eric—" he protested, rising.

"I'm not mad, Ralph. I've had a clue before. Rangarok is known to the north Russian peasantry. It's somewhere between the White Sea and the north of Norway.

"We can't follow the boat, because they'll keep off the regular track and follow the stars. But we can get there before they do. It's in Spitsbergen, probably.

"That's the last unexplored section of northern Europe. Will you come with me?"

"I'll think it over, Eric," he answered. "You don't want a decision offhand? You know, I don't believe that you'll find Rangarok, but there'll be the sea voyage, and—er—"

I agreed, for I could hardly expect his enthusiasm to match mine. And I got down my maps, and we pored over them, and then, for the first time in my life, I told him the story of Leontieff. He listened in his grave way, and when I had ended said:

"You really expect to find your father, then, Eric?"

"I don't know," I answered. "The money from Russia ceased after my mother died. I don't even know for certain that it isn't half a delusion and half childish fantasy.

"But there were Russian adventurers in the north of Europe at the time

when England was mapping out Africa, and they kept their discoveries pretty much to themselves. Anyway, we'll talk it over to-morrow, as you suggested."

"I guess that 'll be best, Eric," he answered. "I've got one or two little things to attend to. Of course I understand that that check is dependent upon my accepting—"

I confess that hurt me. I sat down then and there and wrote him out a check for three hundred and fifty.

"If you don't come, Ralph, you must keep the extra hundred until you get on your feet again," I told him.

And he departed, overwhelmed with gratitude. I lay down on the bed, thinking of him, of his impecuniosity, his helplessness in the affairs of life.

Nothing could have made me happier than his companionship on such a voyage as I was contemplating. And I was firmly resolved to bring Ralph and the princess together.

Thus I made my romance, if not in a book, then in the lives of others, as was my way.

Strangely enough the memory of Editha's outburst had almost passed out of my mind. I could not but realize the gravity of the delusional condition; yet, somehow, I could not believe that it was incurable, or would not yield to care and treatment, once the abnormal conditions of her life were removed.

I believed in her and in her story. And, pondering over it, I wondered whether there might not be some connection between her people and the descendants of Eric the Red, who, having colonized Greenland, disappeared suddenly from history in the fourteenth century, leaving no trace behind them.

Suppose that they had taken their longboats and migrated eastward along the arctic shores, mingling, perhaps, with the remnants of an earlier tribe that had fled to Spitzbergen or northern Russia?

At least, I would not cease my search until I knew.

And, falling asleep, I lived over the night's events again, and awoke with Egbert's ominous warning ringing in my ears. And, awaking late in the afternoon, again I thought it fantasy, until my eyes fell on the little dagger upon a chair beside me.

CHAPTER V.

On to Rangarok.

"NO, they are not the Lapps, for the Lapps are short and square folk, with eyes like those of the Chinese. These are tall and fair, and speak the language of the English, as it seems to me, though Englishmen who have seen and spoken with them deny their kinship."

Bjorn spoke as simply as one for whom all miracles are a part of nature. Though he talked willingly of the fragments of ancient races that inhabit the northern parts of Norway and the islands, it was the first time he had admitted knowledge of any people living beyond the rim of the north European peninsula.

We had taken him aboard my yacht, the Editha, at Hammerfest, engaging him for a six months' voyage, and giving him the impression—at least, I thought then that we had given him the impression—that we were sailing to Spitzbergen, where an occasional tourist had begun to penetrate.

I had been attracted by the quiet young fisherman, who had applied to me for a position. Bjorn was a dreamer—that much was in his eyes. He had no relatives, and the local population spoke of him as a good workman, but a stranger, and queer.

Moreover, he was one of the strongest men I had ever seen, and gave promise of becoming stronger.

About twenty-five, lithe, well-made, and not muscle-bound, not more than six feet in height, by sheer personality he dominated the four men who composed the crew of the Editha. I had seen him lift the two seamen, one in either hand, and hold them put on each side of him, bring them together like dumb-bells before setting them down, unharmed, but most effectively scared.

I believe they had been indulging in a little fun at Bjorn's expense, but they never repeated it.

We had sailed north, instead of turning east toward Spitsbergen; then north by west; and finding no traces of that land which more than one geographer has suspected to exist, I had taken the young Norwegian frankly into my counsel.

For there was something in Bjorn that compelled one's trust. There had seemed to me a hidden purpose in his life; and, like one who lives his life in others, I had wondered what it might be.

"Yes, my friends, I know of the people of whom you speak," he acknowledged as Ralph and I sat in the tiny cabin while the little craft heaved onward through the black' waters of the arctic.

"Then why have you said nothing to us?" asked Wiston petulantly. "Did you not suspect that we had some purpose in cruising in these waters?"

"I will tell you, gentlemen," said Bjorn suddenly. "There are strange folk dwelling northward of us. Strange people whom we fear, for they are witches and wizards, and hold a faith that was our ancestors' in the years before the Christ came into Norway.

"Once, when my father was a boy, they say that the fishermen came upon one of their craft, unlike any ship ever built, and they saw strange figures strangely dressed, on it; yet, when our fishermen drew nearer, they were clothed like unto us, only of queer speech and unwilling to talk or let us aboard.

"And even now, once in a while, some fishing-vessel that has been driven far northward sights one of these boats through the storm, and always it means a prodigious catch of fish and three days of calm weather.

"But woe betide the ship that stays to fish and does not run for home; for on the fourth day comes a storm that leaves no homecoming!

"See, gentlemen!"

He pointed through the port.

"Witches' weather! No speck of ice anywhere in sight, and this is the second day of it. That is why I speak, for your sakes, not for mine.

"Turn back; for on the fourth day such a hurricane will arise that no ship can survive it.

"I will say more. Because I suspected your purpose to find this hidden land I came with you. Long years ago one of our boats, containing my father and brother, was caught in this hurricane and never returned.

"Since then I have longed to visit these accursed folk and take the blood toll, the old Norse blood toll, gentlemen, for all I had in the world.

"And for long I have fought against that impulse, and, later there came to me the wish that I might go to save rather than to slay, to teach them the true faith, as it came to King Haakon of old. For know, gentlemen, that the men who first went north to settle this land were of my stock, and I—even I am

lineally the descendant of the Jarl Sweyn, who led his men thither."

He spoke with a superb unconsciousness of braggadocio, and I, for my part, looked at him in frank admiration.

"You know no more of these people?" inquired Wiston.

"Only what the old legends say of adventurers who, even now, have won to Rangarok, the City of the Clouds, and fared there as they say the old warriors of our people fared in Valhalla, feasting and drinking, and renewing their combats with each other unendingly.

"And mothers still tell their children of them in the long winter evenings. See, gentlemen! That is what we call Rangarok!"

I looked up, startled, as he pointed. The setting sun was sinking behind masses of western clouds, piled up in the shape of a fantastic city, with peaks and pinnacles, black, lined with lurid-red.

"He who would seek Rangarok must pass beyond that barrier," said Bjorn gravely. "But turn back, gentlemen, for there is just time to make harbor before the storm catches us."

Yet, somehow, the young man's tone conveyed to me the impression that to return was the last thing on earth that he desired. He saluted us and went on deck, to take the wheel from one of the seamen.

"What do you make of it, Ralph?" I asked.

"Myths and peasants' legends," he answered lightly. "You know, Eric, old man, I'm with you to the journey's end, but to be frank, I've never believed we'll find anything but the edge of the arctic ice."

"We've been four months coming here," I answered. "Time enough for the princess to have reached her home. She'd have the west winds, you see, and they'd carry her across the Labrador Strait to Greenland, and thence to Iceland, and so—so—"

"We're hunting a needle in a haystack, Eric," he answered, quizzing me. "What made you pick this quarter of the arctic for your Rangarok?"

"Well, they knew nothing of it in the Shetlands. It was not till we neared Hammerfest that the country people began to talk to us. And you saw that carving of the curved serpent on the rocks."

"Well, old man, I don't want to rob you of your enthusiasm," he answered. "That yarn of the Saxon princess certainly stirs my blood, although, you know, I think you saw her during your few seconds of unconsciousness after you fell off the Battery wall."

"You heard the tale that old fellow told us of a race of giants?"

"But he'd never seen them, Eric."

"How about the Cyclops of the Odyssey?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll hold down my job as long as you feel like it," he returned.

"And you'd go on?"

"Just as you say. Yes, let's go on. When we strike the arctic barrier, which ought to be late to-morrow, we can put the Editha about."

I went to Bjorn at the wheel and told him of our decision. As I spoke a sudden light leaped into his eyes. He clapped me on the shoulder in an abrupt fashion wholly unlike his own.

"Eric, son of Leontieff," he began, speaking in a strange voice fraught with intense conviction, "you have chosen, as was the will of the Norns, whom none may gainsay. Therefore persevere, for, though much sorrow will come to you, there will be happiness also. Only beware of a false leader and a false friend!"

The light went out of his eyes, and as it was on the tip of my tongue to ask him how he knew my father's name, he stared at me as if he had only just seen me.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" he asked in his quiet fashion.

"Do you know what you were saying to me just now, Bjorn?"

"No, Mr. Silverstein."

He looked embarrassed and ashamed. "I hope you would not discover my weakness," he faltered. "It is the second sight—a spell that has come upon me at times since I was born. Many of us fishermen have it in the north islands. I hope I gave no offence?"

"By no means, Bjorn," I answered.

But I was growing intensely interested. I felt that things strange beyond conception lay at the journey's end.

I paced the deck in the darkness—the short darkness of late summer—thinking of the princess, the giant, and dwarf, and fingering the little silver dagger to give myself conviction.

Then, as at last I was about to descend to the cabin, Ralph having already turned in, I heard whispering voices, and three men came up and stood before me.

They were one of the engineers and the two sailors, and the look on their

faces, if not mutinous, was at least decided.

"Mr. Silverstein," said one of them, their spokesman, "we've been having a little talk together and we've decided to put our decision up to you, as man to man. We don't like this voyage, and we don't like that crazy man at the wheel.

"He's got the second sight, and he's seen us all dead and lying fathoms down under the black water. We understood the run was to Spitzbergen, and we agreed to go for double wages."

"You've had them, Carlson," I answered.

"Oh, we ain't kicking about that," put in the engineer, "but we're not far south of the ice-pack, and we ain't going to run into the arctic ice, especially as we don't know where you're taking us.

"There's no land up here for a thousand miles. And the ice 'll be round Spitzbergen inside of three weeks more. So we put it up to you: Where are you going?"

I was nonplused at this; I had not anticipated anything of the kind. It seemed to send all my plans crashing earthward.

"There is land north of us, and not so far," I answered. "We hope to strike it-to-morrow or the next day. I'll give you a bounty—two hundred dollars a piece if we sight it, fifty a piece for each day more of the run."

They conferred together, whispering.

"We don't sail north after to-morrow," announced Carlson. "We ain't explorers and wasn't hired as such.

"So it's put about by midday. Once that ice comes down, it 'll outrun the fastest ship sailing."

With which ultimatum the three withdrew, leaving me sick at heart—too sick, to mention the matter to Bjorn, or to Wiston, who might, I sensed, have sided with the men.

So all night long we plunged through the black waters, and when day dawned, at four on a late August morning, there was still no sign of ice anywhere.

I knew, by the increasing cold, that the ice-pack was not far away. We were on the edge of the broad tip of the Gulf Stream, which loses itself in the arctic a little north of where we were.

We breakfasted at five, in blazing sunlight. The sullen demeanor of the men told me that they had discussed the matter further and adhered to their

decision.

In vain I scanned the horizon a dozen times for land that morning. Nothing was visible but the sea, and the fantastic clouds northwestward, which still kept their shapes of peak and pinnacle.

It was not until about noon that one of the seamen shouted, and pointed over the waves.

Far away we saw a little speck bobbing and dipping.

We changed our course and bore down on it. Presently we could make out a raft. On it was what looked like the body of a man. I ordered the whale-boat lowered, taking Wiston and Bjorn, pulled toward it.

It was the body of a man but at first sight it might have been called that of a mummy instead.

Only the head was exposed. The long, flaxen hair dipped in the sea-water, which had washed clean the jagged wound made by an ax, or some such weapon, that had caused instant death.

The blue eyes were half open, and seemed still to flare with the light of battle.

The body was of extraordinary stature—seven feet and some inches, and yet perfectly proportioned. The skull was Norse—there was no mistaking that.

But what attracted our instant wonder was the way in which the body was wrapped. From throat to feet it was incased in thongs of rawhide, which, contracting under the wetting of the waves, had bitten deeply into the flesh, so that, when Wiston cut one with his knife, after long sawing, the naked flesh leaped out; and, unwinding the thongs, the body was revealed encircled with spirals fully two inches deep.

Had not the man clearly been killed immediately by the blow, he could not have survived what must have been the most fiendish torture ever devised upon a captive enemy.

And I shouted aloud, finding here my second clue.

“Do you know what this means?” I cried. “It’s the old Anglo-Saxon method of wreaking vengeance upon a captive enemy. It was taken from the Frisian pagans, and used pitilessly upon such of the invading Danes as were captured in a foray.

“Now do you believe we’re on the right track, Ralph?”

“What deduction do you draw from it, Eric?” he asked, looking at me

curiously.

"Did you notice that the raft was almost stationary in the water?"

"We're out of the Gulf Stream."

"And near the ice, therefore."

"And Rangarok?"

"Lies behind it," I answered, and glanced toward the strange city of the clouds, which seemed to loom up immediately before us.

"You are right,"said Bjorn in a low voice. "Beyond the ice lies Rangarok, which is its safety; and it is only after the three days of witches' weather that the wind raised by the sorcerers drives the ice asunder and admits passage for ships."

"I'm not going to run tilting into the ice-pack," said Ralph angrily. "I'll look for your Rangarok anywhere you please, Eric, but I draw the line there."

"Gentlemen, there is little choice," interposed Bjorn. "But I think, it would be better to go back to our ship before the storm catches us. See!"

He pointed over the sea, whose heaving, oily waters were stirred by a little ripple of wind.

And looking back we perceived that we had been carried a long distance from the Editha.

We set up the sail and, taking the oars, began to pull quickly back toward her.

The aspect of the ocean was quite remarkable. The sea was perfectly calm upon the surface, for the little ripple had died away, but there was a tumultuous surging of immense masses of jet-black water, as if some undertow was at work, agitating it like the stirring of an awakening giant.

And the sail flapped a little and then hung motionless as the wind died.

Presently Bjorn, who had been at the helm, let his hand fall. The boat swung round, lay dead-still on the waves. Startled at the expression on his face, Wiston and I turned round simultaneously.

The Editha vomiting an immense cloud of black smoke, had put about and was making her way southward.

CHAPTER VI.

Abandoned in the Arctic.

FOR a moment the perfidy of the crew left me dumb. I could not quite realize the significance of this maneuver and, catching up the oars. I began to pull desperately in her direction.

Bjorn took the tiller again. But when I glanced up at his face it told me all.

Suddenly Ralph let his oars fall in the oarlocks and swung round upon me.

"Damn you, Eric!" he said with intense feeling. "Damn you eternally for bringing me here!"

And raising his voice, he yelled toward the distant Editha.

There was not the slightest sign that he had been heard, or, if he had been heard, that the mutineers intended to take any notice of us. The ship was well on her way southward again, and already more than a mile distant. The interval was increasing every moment.

I had picked up my little crew on the Hoboken water-front, or, rather, I had allowed the man who sold me the yacht to do so. I had never liked the men overmuch, but I had had no reason to suspect them, and they had served me well during the four months of our journey. Ralph let his hands fall upon the oar-handles. He looked at me with intense bitterness as his head drooped upon his chest.

And I could not blame him, for it was my fault, and our position was the most hopeless conceivable, with the Editha now no more than a little blur against the waves.

Strangely enough, I, who was born with dangling nerves that have held me back from the most ordinary adventures of life, felt an extraordinary exultation. I suppose it was the desperation of the born coward.

"Cheer up, Ralph!" I cried vehemently. "We'll win to Rangarok yet. We can't go back, and so we may as well take advantage of this breeze that is springing up from the south and go forward. Look!"

And I pointed toward a white line on the north horizon—the edge or the

ice-pack.

Ralph Wiston spun round upon me in fury.

"You lunatic!" he exclaimed with concentrated bitterness. "Go on then! We've got to die in one way or another, I suppose!"

But I understood my friend, and knew that he was justified. So I made no answer, but nodded to Bjorn, who put the boat about, and we swung round and headed northward, running before the wind; and I, forgetful of our peril, dreamed again of Rangarok, and of Editha, and of Leontieff.

It must have been late in the afternoon, but the sun was still high in the sky. We raced onward under an increasing wind The ice-pack was in plain sight now. There were no broken floes or bergs.

It was a level field, mounting here and there to gentle hummocks, and extending to right and left as far as the eyes could see. And, in fact, we could do nothing but run full tilt toward it, for the wind behind us was growing into a gale.

It blew with a vengeance, and our full sail bellied, and the boat rushed onward, and the lapping of the waves was music in my ears. I wanted to stand up and shout from very exuberance of spirit.

I, Eric Silverstein, product of East New York, born and bred among her narrow, malodorous streets, felt the cry of something like my father's Viking forebears in my ears then. And, standing up in the boat, I cheered and shouted, while Bjorn sat motionless at the tiller, and Ralph crouched in the bottom.

And suddenly, as the ice-field was, to my calculation, about five miles away, the wind came down upon us. There was a sudden blast, a rending of the sail, and the full hurricane enwrapped us.

Instantly the storm had caught the setting sun and hidden it away, and a blackness as of perpetual night descended. The boat raced onward swifter than a galloping horse, cutting the mountainous surges that swept by on either side.

The howling of the wind shut out all other sounds.

I leaned back. I could no longer see Bjorn's face, nor even Ralph. Somehow I was not afraid, though I never expected to survive.

Yet the boat kept a level keel and a straight course, as if the hurricane, setting behind her, preserved her in the vortex of its fury. It was, in fact, the very heart of the storm that we had struck.

It was extraordinary, that deadly calm that lay about us. I felt no wind on

my face; and yet the howling of the hurricane was momentarily increasing.

The sail had long since been stripped to shreds, and still we drove onward. It was a fantastic nightmare, and it lasted through interminable hours.

"If we strike the ice-field we shall go over instantly," I remember thinking.

Suddenly the moon leered out at me from a tiny rift in the inky sky. By its light I saw the vast field of ice ahead of us.

Mechanically, I counted off the minutes.

I allowed three. One—two? The ice lay straight in front of us as we rushed on in our mad careen. Three! The ice lay all about us!

And following a narrow passage, no wider than a canal, as if it had been cleft for us, the boat rushed onward.

On either side arose the hummocky shapes, leaning malignantly toward us. Behind us was a wall of white spray. In front the jet-black, tenuous streak of water.

Only a miracle could keep us straight upon our unguided course.

But hours sped by and, in a new darkness, still more intense, the boat rushed onward. I was hypnotized by the uniformity of the motion. I did not sleep, but I have no further memory of the events of that short August night.

And, perhaps, I did sleep after all, toward sunrise. For, when I started up, Bjorn was touching me on the arm, and Wiston was seated facing me, looking quite friendly.

It was bright daylight. Behind us lay the great ice-fields, extending on either side as far as one could see.

Between the field and where we lay was a stretch of blue water.

In front of us was a little bay, wedged in among giant cliffs. And on the strip of silver sand on which the calm waves broke sluggishly, were wooden cabins.

The wind had died down to a gentle breeze. The boat was moving toward the shore, though almost imperceptibly. The sun of the early morning hung low over the waves. The air was balmy as an October day.

Ralph leaned toward me.

"Eric, old man!" he began. "Eric, I guess I was a little upset last night"

"So were we all," I answered, giving a very hearty clasp to his extended hand.

"If this is Rangarok," he said, "I'm with you to the limit, Eric."

I had not doubted him. But his words gave me new courage. I looked toward the bay, into which our boat was slowly drifting. The wooden cabins were belching out a modest population.

The sight of them electrified me. The men were clothed in skins, bound with what looked like rawhide about the waist.

The women wore skins fashioned into the shape of garments. Their long hair streamed behind them. They were white savages—not those of the time of Alfred, but those of the rude beginnings of the English race.

Now, as we came nearer, I saw a whole little fleet of coracles drawn up along the water's edge—round wicker boats, lined with hides, such as are used by the most primitive of races the world over.

And when we were perhaps a quarter of a mile away the evident astonishment gave place to panic.

Women, snatching up their babes, began to climb the precipitous cliffs; men, seizing their bows, leaped into their crazy craft and began paddling for dear life.

I heard children screaming. Dogs ran, barking, toward us. An old man was trotting as fast as he could go along the beach, leading a cow.

A tall man came out of a hut and aimed an arrow toward us. It whirred through the air and hissed into the waves ahead of us.

And that, apparently, was the limit of their resistance.

Ten minutes later we landed at a deserted village, with the last of the coracles disappearing round the nearest point of land.

We beached our boat and looked about bewilderingly. There were no signs of life anywhere. We went into the nearest hut.

A very old man, with a long white beard, rose and came fawning toward us.

"O lords," he began in high-pitched old Anglian speech, "accept me for your slave, and spare the people of this wretched settlement. O, mighty lords, we are the slaves of the Danish folk, now and forever."

Illumination came to me.

"We are not Danes," I cried, "but men of a nation allied with yours in the long past, and are come hither as travelers!"

He gaped at me in astonishment, and then, as the meaning of my words came home to him, went to the hut door and yelped wildly.

Instantly, as if by magic, the settlement was alive again. Women, carrying their babes, came out of the caves. The little coracles came dashing round the rocks.

In a minute we were surrounded by the excited throng, fingering our clothes, and uttering exclamations of amazement.

But in the midst of the uproar an extraordinary diversion occurred.

There was, I noticed, a little road that ran upward along the cliffs, into some wooded country, apparently the only ingress into the village. Along this now came an old man of venerable aspect, surrounded by four others.

They were armed with long swords, which they carried bare in their hands; they wore rude armor of hammered iron; each was fully seven feet tall, and one of them, held over the dignitary a banner with the rude picture of —a curled serpent.

CHAPTER VII.

To King Harald's City.

IT was the high priest of Loki, who, leaving the council of the gods, and Odin, his foster-brother, wandered into space, desolating and consuming with lightnings and volcanic fires.

He was best known among the Danes as the father of the Midgard serpent, which ever threatens the destruction of the world; and the emblem was carried by all the more predatory tribes.

I gaped at these splendid warriors as they strode beside their priest—giants, almost immortals, brandishing their flashing swords, while the sunlight shone like gold about their high, winged helmets.

They came up to us and took their places about us, while the high priest addressed me in the Danish tongue.

"I am Asgeld, Loki's priest," he said. "Three moons ago it was revealed to me in a dream that strangers were on their way to pierce the barrier of our realm.

"It has long been prophesied that the day shall come when we, who live now as Odin's warriors in Valhalla, feasting and slaughtering, shall pass away, through the coming of strangers.

"Wherefore Harald Deerfoot, our king, being much disturbed when this dream was announced to him, hath sent me hither to find you and bring you back.

"And lo, you are even as the dream showed! For one of you was fair as the sun, and handsome as an eagle, and the other small and dark and wizen, such as are scribbling bards, and merchants of the Byzantine lands, and others whom Odin's curse doth rest upon. And the third was strong, and like to our people."

He had my mark!

I glanced at Ralph and saw that, though he had not understood, he appreciated the admiring looks of the Norsemen.

And, indeed, though he stood only a trifle over six feet, he was the handsomest man present, well-proportioned, and striking, even in his rough

serge, which contrasted sadly with the panoply of the Norsemen.

And there my resolution that he should marry the Princess Editha took firmer root than ever. What an adventure for me!

I interpreted the priest's words to Wiston and then said that we would be glad to accompany him to the city of Harald, to tell the purpose of our coming.

"It is well, strangers," answered Asgeld. "So let these *theows* bring you cow's milk and bread, and when you have broken fast, litters shall be got ready to convey you, for it is a two days' journey over the mountains to the city of Rangarok."

The old man whom we had encountered in the hut had hung upon the priest's words like one trained to interpret the behests of a master, and now began addressing the populace, which did not seem to have understood the utterance, which was in Danish.

At once the people began to run hither and there, preparing a meal for us. A trestle-table was laid out, loaves of black bread, flat and only slightly leavened, placed on it, with rock salt. I saw the woman coming back along the seashore, leading the cow, and soon we were drinking warm milk out of clay pots and making a hearty breakfast of bread, grilled fish, and honeycomb.

Meanwhile the litters were being prepared, fashioned simply of sacking, coarsely woven and slung from pliant boughs. When all was ready we lay down in these, and were lifted neck-high, each by four men, impressed by the Danes for the service. And so we started.

The ascent proved laborious for our bearers, but at last the summit of the cliffs was reached.

The panorama that met our gaze was superbly magnificent. Range upon range of lofty mountains was disclosed, intersected by valleys in which dwarf timber grew, and some sort of grain—I thought a hardy barley—ripening quickly under the long days of sunshine.

There was, however, no sign of Rangarok—nothing but the rugged hills and the valleys, with their clustered cabins.

Looking seaward, I saw that the water extended a long way round the land, making the part on which we had disembarked almost a peninsula. Northeast, however, the uplands rolled away as far as the eye could see.

And wondering at the extraordinary mildness of the air, considering the latitude, which must have been that of southern Greenland, I got my clue

when I saw open water north of the ice-barrier.

I deduced that the ice was not formed in these waters, but was an extension of the Greenland ice-pack, forced eastward by the Gulf current, particularly in the period of summer; and that the channel through which we had entered was probably at the tip of the peninsula, where the southerly current, sweeping down, kept the pack from rounding it.

As the bearers halted at the summit, Ralph called to me from his litter. Hitherto we three had been kept well apart from one another, I do not know whether by design or accident; now, as he called and motioned to his bearers to bring our litters together, the priest looked back sharply, but made no gesture of interference.

"I want to get the hang of this thing, Eric," said Ralph. "Do you really maintain that these people are an original settlement of Danes, who have enslaved another original colony of Anglo-Saxons?"

"That's what I told you. It looks as if it were true, doesn't it?"

"It's too stupendous to believe easily," he answered. "I tell you, Eric, old chap, hitherto I've thought it was just one of your crazy notions. Do they have money?"

"I don't know. Money was, of course, known to them, but their transactions were usually made in kind. Why?"

"Good Heavens, Eric!" he burst out. "Suppose there's gold up here! Suppose we, with our civilized knowledge, have a chance of getting to be rulers—and getting away with something worth while!

"What a pity we haven't anything but our clothes—not even a revolver amongst us. You haven't?"

"No," I said, delighted that his enthusiasm was beginning to awaken.

"But I fancy we'll find these ancestors of ours—of yours, anyway—very adaptable. And wait till you've seen Editha!"

He smiled and nodded at me, and lay back in his litter. We went on. When the ascent grew steep I wanted to get out and ease the backs of the slaves, but the Danes would not permit this, although they treated us with much respect.

We halted at intervals of about two hours, but the Danes were always eager to press on again, and showed no pity to the panting bearers, goading them on with the flat of their great swords against their thighs and legs.

It was about four in the afternoon, as I judge, when, reaching the summit of a high hill that had dominated the route of march all day, the litter-bearers

sank down, panting, after depositing us on the ground. Standing up, I gave a sudden cry of delight at the spectacle before me.

Across a wide, wooded, and thickly settled country rose an almost precipitous peak. Low clouds hung over it, and seeming to pierce them, uprose the towers and pinnacles of the dream city of the sky.

It was Rangarok, the city of my childish dreams, the far, lost city of my secret aspirations!

Another Camelot, I might call it. For it seemed one with the bare and jagged rocks beneath it, columns, and walls of granite, with Gothic groins and arches, turrets and citadels, and with the genius of Gothic building, it seemed to mount constantly, producing an optical illusion of upward movement, like one of those diagrams that one sees printed in puzzle sections of the magazines.

I cried out; and then I heard another cry. It came from Bjorn, who all through the day had lain back in his litter and spoken hardly a word. He was looking at Rangarok with open mouth and staring eyes.

"There are big deeds to be done there, my friend," he said, laying his hand on my shoulder. "Great adventures, strong hates, deep loves for him who has need of them."

"I have no need of them," I answered. He smiled, but did not contradict me. I looked back toward Ralph, and saw that he had not stirred.

"Ralph Wiston is the man for that," I continued. "Bjorn, did you ever make a hero of a man? And did you ever resolve that, being yourself devoid of all the qualities that make for manliness, you would live your adventures through him? Well, Ralph is my hero."

He smiled again, with a far-away look upon his face that I had seen on the boat, and turned away.

About a hundred yards from where we had rested was a small stockade, built of sharpened stakes driven deep into the ground, and erected in the form of a square. These were bound with withes and osiers, and had at one time been plastered, though the mud had fallen away. The whole was thatched, thus forming a sort of fort as well as a camping place.

We entered through a gap just wide enough to admit a litter. Inside I saw evidences of recent occupation, probably by the same party on its way to the coast to seek us—if, indeed, the high priest's story were true.

There was a roughly shaped barrel, half buried in the ground, containing barley beer, there was meal in another, and under a covering of some

dampened weeds, apparently compressed to hold them alight, were the still living embers of a fire.

The *theows* were now dismissed outside the stockade, with a few handfuls of meal apiece. The Danes flung off their helmets and armor, and began to stretch themselves upon the sacking with which the whole place was strewn.

While supper was in preparation Asgeld came toward me benignantly, and motioned to me to seat myself upon one of two little stools placed near the central fire.

"O stranger, have no fear, but feast and sleep well," he said, "and likewise your companions, for to-morrow shall see us at the gates of Rangarok.

"And since, in three days' time, King Harald celebrates his nuptials with the Princess. Editha, you shall doubtless be welcomed with much hospitality, for we Danes are ever eager to learn news of new peoples."

And so one question which had beat trembling upon my tongue for long was never uttered.

"This Princess Editha is of your people?" I inquired.

"Nay, stranger, is it not known even in the Byzantine lands that it is not customary for our kings to wed among their subjects?" asked Asgeld incredulously. "And truly the nuptials would have been celebrated long ago, but for the witchcraft of Haggudra, the wise woman, which drove the princess forth from this realm, to wander in the Byzantine lands.

"Thence she has at last returned, to the great joy of Harald the king, and Theobald, her father, king of the Anglian people, and the wedding will be observed three days hence with incomparable splendor. And all the malice of the Trolls cannot undo this."

"The Troll folk hate her?" I inquired.

"Verily, stranger, lords though we be in this land, we have no magic equal to that of the Trolls, and their witch, Haggudra. And you must know that Haggudra hates King Theobald and the Princess Editha, for she longs to restore the old gods whom the Anglians have put down in favor of the White Christ.

"Now it is written in the treaty whereby the Anglians came under our protection that their faith should not be molested. And surely it matters nothing to us. Yet we are glad that Haggudra would restore our gods to Rangarok, for then doubtless the Anglians would forget their former freedom.

“The Anglians are the strangest of all peoples,” he continued, stroking his white beard. “And I know, for I have penetrated far among the outer islands.

“Other races will fight, and when they are beaten, yield. But with the Anglians it is otherwise.

“It is not ‘I yield—spare me!’ or ‘I fight till death!’ as with other folk, but ‘I yield if you agree that nine men may meet together in the street to debate upon all subjects,’ and ‘I yield, but I must have my god for worship, and nine measures wheat of must, equal twelve of rye; also it shall be forbidden to drink ale between the hours of six and twelve on the day of the sun.’

“Verily, stranger, there is nothing to fear from the Trolls,” he went on, “for though in olden days this stockade was built against them, they are now our good friends, and we are bound together by our common faith. Beware only of their magic; for in making that which is not seem that which is, they are cunning beyond all the world.”

By now the meal was being consumed. Great tankards of foaming ale were filled from the cask, and barley cakes baked in the embers.

The Danes grew boisterous as they grew drunk. Rather sullen and somber during the day’s march, they now gave way to their wilder imputes. Old chants arose, thrillingly familiar te me. Swords were displayed, and boasts uttered.

Even Bjorn seemed to catch that wild spirit which filed the little stockade with sound, and joined in the songs and shouting.

Then Ralph, who, too, had been drinking, sprang to his feet in uncontrollable excitement.

“I’ll give you a song, fellows!” he cried; and the Danes seemed to catch his meaning, for there was a momentary hush; and Ralph yelled out the words of a well-remembered college drinking song, a simple refrain that might have been translated with hardly a change of more than a few syllables.

It brought the tears to my eyes to see these wild men hanging upon his words, catching the chorus and throwing it back to him, It was a privilege to sit back silent and watch him.

How much I owed him! What a friend he had been to me!

Presently the shouts and revelry began to die away as the roisterers stretched out their huge limbs in sleep beside the fire. Only the sentinel, standing sleepily in the entrance to the stockade, stirred.

I crouched under my sacking, still looking with all the kindly thoughts of friendship toward Ralph, not far away, and Bjorn, at my feet.

It was eery there, in the sharp night wind, with the cry of a fox at times borne down the valley, and the undefinable noises from the hills.

CHAPTER VIII..

Kidnaped by the Trolls.

I DON'T know if I slept, but I know that I awakened with a start and a sense of impending danger.

At first I thought it was the moonlight, which fell full on my face; for I am one of those nervous beings to whom moonlight means sleeplessness and apprehension. But it was not that; it was the sense of being watched.

I was lying close to the picket-fence, and all of a sudden, through the openings between the stakes, I saw a pair of bright little eyes peer into mine.

At first I thought that they were those of some beast of prey, and recoiled from the expected fangs. But a finger was laid across, a lip; and then I realized that it was a little dwarf who was watching me—one of the Trolls.

He was a little fellow, hardly more than three feet tall, with a shrewd, cunning, and yet not unkindly look. He thrust his face quite close, to the stakes, and assumed an expression of extraordinary and portentous solemnity.

Then with a gesture that could not be mistaken, he pointed toward the sleeping Danes, drew his finger across his throat, and touched mine through the stakes.

Next he proceeded, with a sharp, flexible knife, to cut deftly and noiselessly into the fire-hardened stakes. It was astonishing how he was able to work thus, undetected, within a few feet of the standing sentry.

Not a sound came from the knife, and yet the coils of hard wood were coming away as if under a plane. And, as I watched him, I perceived another little fellow at the nearest corner of the square. He was working at the same task in frantic haste, and Bjorn, who lay there, was awake and watching him.

For a moment I was tempted to give the alarm; but Bjorn, as if anticipating my purpose turned on me with a look of grave warning. I hesitated and, as I did so, the intention became useless.

For the two sections of the barricade fell, and simultaneously, with savage pipings and squeals, a swarm of tiny figures burst into the stockade.

I saw the sentry fall, thrust through the body with a miniature pike. I saw the Danes leap to their feet in bewilderment, still fuddled with ale and sleep;

but before they could lay hand to sword they fell beneath the weapons of the Trolls.

And like a swarm of rats, the little figures went scurrying here and there, tripping up their giant adversaries and driving upward into their bodies with the sharp points of their toy weapons, hardly longer than walking-sticks.

I saw Asgeld, the high priest, snatch up the Loki banner, furl it, and sweep it round his head, while he shouted in the reminiscent joy of battle that might come to an old man. At the sight of the sacred emblem the little men seemed awed, but only for the moment.

One of them dodged under the banner, put his head beneath it, looked up, and with an absurd deliberate pursing of the lips, as if to measure his blow, sent his pike home in the old man's body.

Meanwhile, as I tried to leap to my feet, a dozen pairs of little hands had pulled me bodily through the gap in the stockade, and I felt ropes being adjusted about my limbs. Trussed and unable to move, I could only watch the massacre.

As the priest fell I saw flames leaping among the withes of the stockade. The dried wood began to blaze fiercely.

The goblin murderers dragged me out of reach of the flames. Near me I saw Ralph, groaning at his bonds, and Bjorn, securely tied, but with a faint smile on his face.

I wriggled toward him.

"Bjorn, have you a knife?" I asked him. "I can get one hand free. Perhaps we three can get free while they are burning the enclosure."

"Do you see flames then, Eric?" He asked me.

"Flames? Look at that!" I cried, as a dense column of smoke shot up toward the sky.

His question bewildered me, and before I could say anything more, the Trolls had come between us and dragged us apart. I looked from face to face. They were like imps' faces, like those absurd faces of Billikens that one sees in shop windows.

On each little countenance sat absorption, care, wise thought; and if any of these had ever been young, at least one and all were now well beyond life's meridian.

The only thing that helped me to keep my balance was the knowledge that a dwarf race had existed in Europe in Anglo-Saxon times, as such races still exist in other regions of the world to-day.

These were the dwarfs of fairy stories, the pixies, the Irish leprechaun, and such little folks. After all, it was not remarkable that they should have survived in this unknown outpost of the world.

But the sight of a face that winked and grimaced at me from among the others made my heart almost stop beating; for I recognized Egbert, the counselor of the Princess Editha.

He sidled toward me as I lay on the ground, and squatted down on his haunches beside me.

"Oh, Eric, greetings!" he said. "Have no fear, for in a little while you shall understand better.

"It is at the command of the wise woman Haggudra that we bring you to the princess. Are you willing to go in peace to her, and afterward to return hither?"

I nodded assent; whereon he slashed he ropes that bound my legs, leaving them free. Then my companions were similarly given freedom of movement. Our arms, however, were still fastened to our sides, with Troll cunning, so that we could hardly move them.

Ralph Wiston strained furiously at his bonds.

"I don't like this infernal business, Eric," he said angrily. "I didn't come here to get mixed up in things like this.

"Let's try to get back to the seashore. We can get a boat there. I'd rather be back among the ice-floes than with these bloodthirsty, little ruffians."

"Just wait till you have seen the princess!" I answered.

For I knew what the effect would be, so I did not take to heart the muttered imprecation that met my words. And, after all, our friends are still our friends, whatever their moods are.

It was not far from dawn, and as we got on our feet, the little men, swarming all about us, uttering little squeaks to hasten us, urged us along.

We took a path over the hills, which descended after a while until it entered what looked like a subterranean cavern, totally dark. Here we stopped for a moment, and Egbert sidling up to me, began to wind a filmy cord or twine about my finger-tips.

This he did to Ralph and Bjorn also, so that we three were bound with the same cord; then running ahead of us, into the darkness, he disappeared.

I could no longer hear the faintest sound of the Trolls, but the twine slackened and tightened about my fingers alternately, guiding and drawing

me effectively.

We went on for about half an hour, as I judged, in entire ignorance of our direction, turning many times, until suddenly we emerged into the twilight again, to find ourselves in a small valley, completely surrounded by high and unscalable cliffs.

It was the Trolls' city that we had reached. Everywhere in the soft chalk of the cliffs, little houses had been carved out, so that the cliffs were like tenements and the valley between like a high road. From each little window Troll boys and girls leaned out to watch us pass, chuckling and grimacing at us.

Troll mothers, carrying large, heavy-headed babies, with the same look of premature senility, held them up to see us, and themselves stared at us, their bright, birdlike eyes full of inquisitive wonder. Aged Trolls turned to watch us from the entrance of their dolls' apartments.

The whole city was scrupulously clean and orderly, and little Troll scavengers were bustling to and fro, with looks of earnest solicitude on their putty faces, as they removed fallen leaves and pieces of debris.

Here the twine ran out, and the dwarf Egbert appeared out of a house, with a grin on his wise face, and dancing before us, motioned to us to take the lead.

We went on toward a flight of natural steps in the precipitous side of a cliff, doubtless a terrace erosion. Above this was a thicket, with a twisting path which ended on the hillside, in a little amphitheater, at the back of which was a deep excavation roofed by a wall of rock.

Here I saw a number of figures, both dwarfs and men of ordinary stature. The latter I discerned to be *theows*, or Saxon slaves.

But there were two figures there which drew my eyes instantly.

One was that of an aged woman, bent almost double with years. She leaned heavily on a stout stick, and when she raised her head stretched upward like a turtle's, shook the wisps of white hair back and looked at me, I thought her face the most diabolical that I had ever seen in living humanity.

The other was the Princess Editha. And now I saw the familiar form of the giant Knut behind her.

She looked at us as if hardly believing that it was I, until the Trolls halted us before her. Then she turned angrily upon Egbert.

In bonds, and my friends, counselor?" she asked.

"It was Haggudra's orders, O princess!" muttered the little man, looking

toward the witch.

Editha, drawing a knife from her girdle, cut our bonds, one after the other, looking all the time from me to Ralph, and less often from Ralph to me.

"It is you then, O Eric?" she asked incredulously. "How did you find the fairway through the ice into this land of ours? Verily, since you left us so unkindly in your own country I had no hope of seeing you again."

She spoke so innocently and kindly that I knew no memory remained to her of that night's demoniacal possession.

"O princess, that shall be told later!" I answered. "Suffice it that we three men have come here, pledged to offer ourselves to your service.

"And this is my friend Ralph of whom I spoke, who is my companion, and who I have always loved as a brother."

She turned her eyes upon him, and then, as if abashed by the frankness of his gaze, she let them fall again, while the red began to mantle her cheeks.

I thought them the most splendid couple that I had ever seen. My dream for Ralph promised to come true.

"O Princess Editha," he answered gallantly, "I pledge my faith in your service, to be loyal and true, even as my friend Eric has pledged me."

And raising her hand to his lips, he imprinted a kiss upon the tips of her slender fingers.

The act was so courtly and well-timed that it filled me with delight. Editha would not have been a woman if she had not looked pleased. Doubtless she was.

Only the flutter of her eyelid on her cheek told of the impression Ralph had made on her. And yet, so curiously are we constituted, so much of evil is mixed up in us, that I must confess I felt a strange pang, a sudden sense of desolation at the sight.

Jealousy? It was something I had never felt before. I think it was only a dawning regret that fate had destined me to live my romances in others' lives.

For just an instant I wished that Ralph were I, and I were he.

But the next moment I had shaken off the feeling, as the princess came quickly to where I stood. As she moved I noticed the hag Haggudra—as I rightly surmised her to be—come cringing toward her.

Editha turned with a vehement gesture.

"Back old woman!" she cried. "Do you not know that your time has not

come?"

Mumbling and shooting baleful glances at us, Haggudra withdrew.

Then the princess was walking between Ralph and myself; and Bjorn was following as if to ward off the Trolls, though these only gaped and grimaced after us.

Then my eyes fell upon Egbert standing before Haggudra, and I realized —Heaven alone knows how I did so—that the witch Haggudra was the princess's evil mentor, that the Troll folk were Haggudra's servants, but neutral of sympathies, and that Egbert was a go-between, actuated secretly by good-will toward the princess.

"I must talk to you, my friends," said Editha in a low voice, as we strolled toward the further end of the little amphitheater under a sky already flushed with pink. "Eric, here, has doubtless told you, O Ralph, of the purpose which brought me to his own country—and yours.

"That purpose was unfulfilled, and I returned unsuccessful. My father, Theobald, I found, still reigns over his people, being Lord of Rangarok under Harald Deerfoot, who returns from a foray among the outer islands three days hence.

"When Harald learned that I had departed he was terribly wroth; since it was shown that it was my own act, he could not punish my people. Already messengers have apprized him of my return last moon, and he hastens southward for our nuptials.

"And these must take place, for the sake of the Anglian people, unless __"

That unfinished sentence, the innocent coquetry in the look that she flashed at Ralph, set my heart galloping. There was no doubting that these two were already in love.

"There is one chance by which I may be saved from a fate worse than death to me," she went on hurriedly. "You must know that by an ancient custom, Harald must hold tournament in Rangarok for three days, during which he must fight any man who challenges his supremacy; and if any man best him, that man wins me for his bride and becomes overlord of the city."

She looked at Ralph again, and he kindled to her glance as tow under the flame.

"I will fight for you, O my princess!" he cried. "And I will overthrow King Harald in the tournament, and win you for my overlordship in Rangarok."

"So others have said," she answered, with a touch of archness. "However, I do not doubt your will, my lord Ralph; if you win, I have no choice but submission.

"But of these matters my counselor, Egbert, will speak further to you in Rangarok. There is this more to be said now:

"A curse has lain on me since childhood, for when I was a cradled infant I was stolen from my mother's side by night by a thievish Troll woman—one of those who, having lost their own infants, crave the child of a mortal.

"In those days, as now, the witch Haggudra was queen of the Trolls, for they say that she is almost immortal, and lived even in the days before our ancestors left Angle-land. Through her power I was restored.

"But this was the bargain that she made by night I should be the Princess Editha, but when day comes I must take on my Troll nature again. So much I know, but of what I am during the day I have only a dim memory, and from sunrise to sunset only the witch Haggudra possesses power over me, and Egbert who has knowledge of certain spells.

"Therefore, O Ralph, remember that it is I, Editha, who speaks to you. So if you come by day to Rangarok and find me changed, listen not to me, disregard me, disobey me, for it is then not I who speak, but the accursed Troll changeling."

"Overcome by the pathos of her words I, too, raised her hand, and kissed it. But this time Editha seemed unmoved by the action.

It was a very different thing from having one's fingers kissed by such a man as Ralph Wiston.

I turned to Ralph and began to translate what Editha had told me; but I was surprised when Ralph said that he had understood the greater part of it.

Yet, though they would look strange enough if set down on paper, the words of the North Anglian dialect are much more akin to modern English than is the Flemish, for instance, the nearest of modern languages.

"I have your pledge then, O my friends," said Editha sweetly. "You will be present in Rangarok at the festivities, and Egbert, who will be there, will show you what must be done.

"And now you must go. Do not linger, for when the sun appears, the witch Haggudra resumes her sway."

This time she put out her hand to Ralph as if expecting his salutation, and, quite by an afterthought, to me. Then she signed to Egbert, who came quickly up to us.

"Delay not," he whispered, "for if you are not above the cliffs, whither no Troll may go in daytime, before the sun rises, Haggudra's magic holds you to your death."

"Good-by, O princess!" cried Ralph, turning toward Editha.

To my surprise she did not seem to hear him. She was standing still like an automaton, her blank eyes fixed on space. Then I remembered, and knew the meaning of this portent.

"Come!" I cried, pulling Ralph by the sleeve.

But he was still looking at Editha. Bjorn nudged him, but he would not stir.

"And I saw a smile of malice break out on old Haggudra's withered face. New life seemed to animate her, she hobbled toward us, bobbing and curtsying.

"Editha!" cried Ralph.

Again I saw that awful look on the princess's face. She beckoned to Ralph and stretched out her arms toward him.

"Come to me, O Ralph!" she whispered.

He started toward her. As he did so I saw a ray of sunlight break through a chink in the cliffs.

And instantly, as Ralph, like a man hypnotized, was walking toward Editha and Haggudra, now by her side, and nodding and chuckling and whispering to her—instantly, putting all my weak strength into the blow, I knocked Ralph Wiston to the ground and, seizing him by the coat, began to drag him to where Egbert stood, furiously gesticulating, upon a little pathway that ran up the cliff behind the amphitheater.

As I did so I saw Editha's eyes blaze with fury. Balked of her prey, she had become as upon that awful night on the caravel.

"To the sacrifice!" she raved. "Bring him to me, ye Trolls, that I may drink his heart's blood and grow strong on it!"

Drawing a knife from her bosom, she rushed at Ralph.

But now Bjorn and I had lifted him bodily to the pathway, and Editha's upward blow missed him, and the knife dashed against the rocks and fell from her hand. I saw the goblin crew swarm toward us.

But suddenly the edge of the sun uplifted itself over the hills.

And instantly, like fantoms of the night, the Trolls had vanished, scurrying away like rats into the recesses of the rocks.

Turning as I ran, panting, and clutching at Ralph, I saw Haggudra pulling at Editha's arm; and the look of baffled rage and malice on the old witch's face was the same as that which I had seen in Editha's eyes.

Then panting and stumbling, with Ralph on his feet now, and a willing fugitive, we found ourselves at the top of the cliff. "Blindly we continued to run, into a blaze of sunlight which, till our eyes had grown accustomed to it, made all the world a dancing fantasmagoria.

Then Ralph uttered a wild cry and pointed before him. I looked and saw, not twenty yards away, through the thickets, the stockade, unburned, just as it had been when we entered it, and the sentinel in the gap, leaning against the stakes heavy with sleep.

But when we turned we found no sign of the cliff up which we had come. There, was nothing but the rocky hillside, stretching away toward the valley below.

Bewildered, we passed into the stockade, unseen by the sleeping sentry. The Danes lay, snoring, upon their sacking. Old Asgeld, his white beard adroop over his chest, slept by the dying fire.

We looked at one another in stark surprise. This was more terrifying even than the massacre!

Then Bjorn spoke.

"O my friends, this was what I suspected, from the first," he said, "for I have heard legends of the power of the Trolls. It was all magic, such as the Troll folk know well how to wield—illusion, as the moderns call it."

"But we saw Editha!" I cried.

"Verily, we entered the Troll city, and we saw Editha; the princess, and the accursed witch, Haggudra! But for the rest, there was neither slaying nor burning. That was just such a trick as the Troll folk love to play."

"We saw the princess," muttered Ralph, and I saw that, with the spell of her personality strong upon him still, he could not determine how much was real, and how much make-believe.

The look on his face went to my heart.

"Ralph," I said, "this is my understanding of the matter. It was hypnotism. Do you understand? No magic about it—or, rather, the modern explanation and equivalent of magic.

"A power that is used daily by practitioners in every large hospital on earth. We aren't out of our element; we know this power and we can guard against it."

“She looked like a devil,” muttered Ralph. “And I—I tell you, Eric,” he cried, catching me by the wrist, “I didn’t believe what you told me about her, but it’s all true.

“She means to me just about as much as you said she’d mean—and more. What is it? In Heaven’s name, tell me!”

“A clear case of dual personality,” I answered. “It’s hypnotism again—the work of the witch Haggudra.

“I suppose the old hag got her into a state of expectancy by telling her that story about having changed her in her cradle—and then it was easy. Nothing of magic about that either, Ralph. And we’ll cure that some day, by the same means of suggestion.”

“But that depth of evil—can it exist in all of us, unsuspected?” he asked, more as if talking to himself than to me.

I could not answer that. The secrets of personality are still hidden, even from the most profound.

But I knew that the girl’s true nature remained, struggling against the evil spirit. Should we not meet her, then, and save her from King Harald, as she had given me to believe, upon the opening day of Harald’s tournament?

I believed so, and I believed that, though the massacre had been illusion, we three had really seen the Troll city beneath the ground, and talked with Editha.

And, looking toward the pinnacles and peaks of Rangarok, all wrapped in the golden light of morning, I vowed to free the Princess from the hypnotic spell cast by the witch, and give her into Ralph Wiston’s arms.

CHAPTER IX.

In Rangarok.

A FEW miles from the city a little cavalcade met us, consisting of three or four pages, leading four of the most magnificent horses that I have ever seen. The boys, who were gaily clad in silks and velvets, dropped to the ground and doffed their bonnets to us.

"Mount, strangers," said Asgeld, "for it would not be seemly that you should come afoot into Rangarok."

And, suiting the action to his words, the old man sprang, armored as he was, into the saddle of a splendid bay, while Bjorn, Ralph, and I, each choosing his steed, mounted also, the Danes closing about us.

We had surmounted the last hill and were approaching the city, whose magnificence increased with every stride of our horses. Around it was a fertile tract of land, green under frequent rains, such as even now was spreading like a fine mist over the country.

I saw a massive wall of stone, surmounted with many towers and fronted by a broad ditch of water that ran, like a serpent, twisting in and out of the angles of the fortifications, till it bent round with the walls and disappeared in the distance.

And, towering above the narrow streets, rose the great buildings, climbing constantly as the heart of Rangarok was approached, the topmost point, or citadel, uprearing itself with many a pinnacle toward the low-lying clouds.

Out of the gates a multitude began pouring toward us. And, accustomed as I was beginning to be to our surroundings, I rubbed my eyes, wondering—whether this, too, were illusion, and destined to pass away.

For here they jostled each other, just as in the old books of my delight—knave and squire, *theow*, jarl, and thegn, some in the long robes and costly furs of dignity, the many in the short, leather kilt and sandals of the Saxon.

There were girls, too, as bright and human as our own at home, to all appearance, in spite of their strange attire; and all came chattering and laughing toward us, and, surrounding our guards at a respectful distance,

cheered us and cried out in welcome and in wonder.

Old Asgeld seemed to be verging upon a communicative mood. I had seen the old fellow smiling and stroking his white beard, as if his thoughts were pleasant ones. I was about to venture on some remark when he turned in his saddle as he rode beside me.

"O Eric," he said—for I had told him our names— "what think you of Rangarok? Is there a city of the Byzantines, except that of Constantine, of such a splendid aspect? Nay, is not Rangarok the equal in magnificence of Roum herself?"

"Truly, I almost think so," I answered diplomatically.

"And yet you have not seen the splendor of our capital," he answered. "And the welcome that awaits you is worthy of such a city."

Here, as he began smiling and stroking his beard again, I asked him, a little uneasily, what was expected of us in Rangarok.

"That I will now tell you," he answered, looking hard at me. "Know, O Eric, that, like most people, we have customs which may not be changed.

"Know, too, that, save for Harald Deerfoot, our king, who is not of true Danish birth, never a stranger has crossed the ice during this century past; consequently our ancient laws have suffered much through disuse."

"And what are these laws, O Asgeld?"

"That the gods be propitiated," he answered. "We know well the day will come when a stranger, crossing the ice-way, shall pull the sword of Odin from its sheath in Odin's temple; and, when this comes about, the splendors of Rangarok shall fall, and he shall rule the remnants of the Danish people.

"Therefore, to all who come, the opportunity must be given of pulling Odin's sword from its sheath, which none yet has done since the great Odin placed it there before the memory of man begins. And, if ye fail in that, as assuredly ye will, there remains the second test.

"That, if ye will, and prefer not to go straight to the end, ye meet Harald, our king, in fair battle. And, if any of you vanquish him, he shall rule in his stead.

"Verily, in this way Harald became our king; for, though he could not pull Odin's sword from its sheath, yet he overthrew him who ruled before him, whose name may not be spoken, and so ruled in his stead.

"But since no man has ever looked on Harald's flashing sword and lived. I doubt not ye will prefer to go straight to the end."

“What is this end?” I asked, feeling decidedly uncomfortable as I saw the old pagan chuckling and smiling to himself again.

“That, O stranger, it is not now permissible to reveal,” he responded. “But take heart, for assuredly ye shall either pull Odin’s sword from its sheath, being men of much vigor of body; or failing that, perchance one of you will overthrow Harald and rule in his place.

“And till the morrow, as is the custom among civilized races such as ours, ye are guests of honor, and shall be tented and feasted in the precincts of King Theobald, the Atheling.”

“What’s he saying now?” inquired Ralph behind me, leaning forward upon his horse and spurring it toward mine as old Asgeld rode a little away. “I can understand something of the Anglian, but this Danish is mere gibberish to me.”

I was about to tell him when Bjorn came up on the other side and drew him back. I heard the two in discourse behind me, but could not distinguish what Bjorn was telling him.

The news was not particularly joyful, but I tried to show my unconcern as I saw old Asgeld eying me, and pulling at his beard and trying to hide the malicious smile on his furrowed face. I had no doubt that some form of bloody sacrifice had been devised for us.

And yet, strangely enough, I had an implicit confidence that somehow we should escape from our difficulties. I had staked all my faith on Ralph.

And I believed that, on the morrow, failing to pull the sword from its sheath—and this, no doubt, was some sort of trick such as the ancient nations had—he would overthrow Harald and win Editha.

I look back as I rode, and saw him sitting on his horse, looking every inch a king. My trust would not prove to have been misplaced.

I felt a reaction of joy in my heart. And so we rode on, until the massive walls loomed above us, and we crossed the wide drawbridge into the city.

The streets were packed with people, cheering us, and so thickly clustered that it was all our guards could do to force a passage, which they did with the flats of their swords, letting them fall unmercifully on the heads of all who stood in their way.

From the flat housetops flowers were thrown before us. A medley of strange cries, more strangely reminiscent of modern English, buzzed about us. And it came to me that these people, knowing the old legend, looked on us as deliverers.

I saw the Danes scowling and guessed that they realized the import of the city's joy.

But as we progressed, constantly ascending the narrow, cobbled street, my wonder grew. This was a city of thousands, and ever beyond us loomed up the massive citadel; until the houses suddenly fell away and disclosed a city within a city.

A fairy city, such as the most cunning architect could hardly have conceived. It dwarfed the city behind us, with its soaring spires, mounting and ever mounting, till the topmost pinnacles appeared incredibly remote.

All round it ran a mighty wall, studded with towers, but without a ditch, since it would have been impossible to excavate into the solid granite of that mountain top.

And the whole seemed poised in air. For, as we neared the gateway, I realized that there was a space of perhaps fifty feet between the containing wall and the citadel, a sheer drop from the wall's summit into immeasurable depths.

The only access was by means of an immense stairway, spanning this interval, and coiling like a silken strand up toward the front of the buildings.

And now the explanation of this extraordinary and divine construction, involving some lost principle of the builder's art, grew clear.

Rangarok, or rather the citadel which was the heart of Rangarok, was built upon the summit of a narrow, towering peak, cut off from the city proper by a fissure in the earth, perhaps five hundred feet in depth.

The wall of the citadel was built on the far side of this fissure; the citadel was on the other side of the chasm; and across this chasm had been flung the fairy bridges of which I counted four—not straight as a suspension bridge is thrown, but in a spiral, one end terminating in the gateway, the other two hundred feet beyond and seventy-five above, upon a level with the top of the peak.

If you can imagine a rope thrown by a sailor, or better, a strand of silk thrown by a girl, poised in the air at the instant when it uncurls, you can picture the wonderful bridge that hung before my eyes.

Old Asgeld whispered a password to a guard, and the gates swung open —they seemed to work by hydraulic power. Our horses began to ascend the steep and winding ramp of the bridge, which ended in another gateway under the palace.

Looking back as the bridge wound, I could see the city of Rangarok

beneath us, black with people; behind this the ridges of the mountains, like folds in a table-cloth; and far in the distance, the arctic ice.

"Tell me, O Eric, hath Byzantium, as we sometimes call Constantine's city, anything to show more fair than this?" he asked again.

"Nothing, O Asgeld," I answered. "It seems to me that spirits, and not men, have built this city."

"Aye," he said, nodding his head. "The Trolls built it at the behest of Odin, who still is worshiped here, though the god of the Christians also hath his temple here.

" Yet all this will pass away upon the day when the appointed one shall pluck the sword of Odin from its sheath."

I was incapable of saying more just then. My pulses were singing in my ears, and I realized that this was due to the altitude.

We must have been many thousand feet above sea-level The air was vaporous from the low-lying clouds, which dispersed a gentle rain like a mist.

Passing through the gateway we found ourselves in an enclosure of perhaps a half-mile by one-third in extent. This was the very summit of the peak, and in the center was a wonderful building of the whitest marble, not very large, but shining like snow against the great pile of rock beneath it, black as ebony.

All around this outcrop the ground had been leveled, no doubt through centuries of patient workmanship on the part of the people; with such primitive tools as they had at their disposal.

On one side was the palace proper. On others were extensive buildings, which I took to be colleges or public offices. These were not all contiguous, and between them I caught glimpses of the wall of the citadel, with the guards patrolling it.

And I was astonished and pleased to see a building surmounted with a cross, and evidently the cathedral of the Anglian populace—nay, as we rode past I heard the chant of priests and saw that it was densely packed with worshipers.

"This, too, shall pass away," said Asgeld, nodding contemptuously toward the edifice.

We rode on, rounding the mass of black rock, with Odin's temple perched high upon it, and came upon an open space with a structure looking much like the grand stand of a race-course.

It had been newly erected, and consisted of a long row of wooden seats,

covered with red cloth. It fronted on the long side of an ellipse, down whose center a rough partition of wooden boards had been set up. It was the tilting-field of Harald's tournament.

Carpenters were still at work upon the lists, and a dozen or more white tents had been pitched, at either end. One of these, at the far end of the lists, flew a flag showing a double-headed eagle on a yellow back-ground.

"King Harald's tent," said Asgeld.

"And his flag?"

"Truly, the eagle is his symbol, and it has ever proved a fortunate one," he answered.

The sight startled me, for the double-headed eagle is, of course, the Russian emblem. I had expected that he would have shown a ship, or, at least, some battle device of the ancient Danes.

I knew the eagle had been used by the Romans, but had always believed that the double-headed bird was of modern origin.

However, I had no time to wonder. For a vast concourse of people were already buzzing about us, having evidently heard the news of our arrival; and just then still more came pouring out of the cathedral doors.

They were headed by a procession of a dozen priests, who chanted as they moved beneath an uplifted crozier, which was upheld in the hand of a venerable old man, clothed in coarsest sackcloth. As he approached us his blue eyes scanned us benignantly; his face was drawn with suffering, and his body emaciated with fasting.

At the sight of him old Asgeld made a sign to us to dismount. But he himself remained on horseback, and, spurring his animal forward, he made it rear until its uplifted hoofs almost grazed the old priest's forehead.

"O king in Rangarok, by the grace of our Lord Harald the King, behold these strangers!" he shouted insultingly.

Then, turning his steed without the slightest ceremony, he clattered off toward the gateway, followed by his Danes, while we three faced the old man in discomfiture and humiliation at having been the medium of the affront.

But I could see at once that this was both designed and customary. The old priest looked at us patiently, and yet eagerly.

"I bid you welcome to Rangarok," he said, "for verily, since the first days of my youth, none but my Lord Harald, the deerfooted, has crossed the fairway of the ice to come into our land. It was in an evil day that he came, for our old oppressors, the Danes, had grown mild before he rallied them to

his eagle standard for murder and foray.

"Know ye that I am Theobald, King of the North nglicans, and ruler of an oppressed and miserable race, which looks anxiously to its deliverance. I doubt not that already ye know the perilous fate that awaits you; nevertheless, if ye are indeed men of our kindred, as was revealed in a dream to Asgeld, Loki's priest, tell me, that I may rejoice in it."

I bent low before Editha's father.

"O king," I answered, "we three men are come into your land for no other purpose than to aid you and yours against the oppressor.

"One of us" —I took Ralph by the hand and led him, forward— "is of your stock; and I, though of other races, am by birth a citizen of an Anglian people. And this one" —here I indicated Bjorn— "is, indeed, of a race once akin to the Dane, but hating him for his murderous cruelty."

How my pulses thrilled as Ralph confronted Theobald. He was unmistakably the leader of our party; he looked the noblest man in that assemblage.

He had not the stature, nor the strength of Bjorn, but he had a moral power that was convincing. The people recognized it. Even the clouded faces of the pale priests brightened as their eyes lit on him.

"It is good," said Theobald simply. "Tomorrow Harald, our lord, returns from his foray in the outer isles. For the rest of the day take your ease in your tent, and rest. My page shall conduct you, and the people shall not disturb you."

He called to a little page, dressed in coarse monk's-cloth, who came forward and led us away toward one of the largest tents, a square marquee situated at the nearer end.

It contained straw paillasses, covered with some gay-colored cloth, and a low table. We had hardly flung ourselves down when another page approached, carrying a tray with spiced wines and pasties containing some sort of fish, which in our famished state we found good eating, even though we had to use our fingers.

And after that we slept until late in the afternoon. It was Ralph who awakened me.

"Eric," he said, "I heard old Asgeld telling you something this morning. Bjorn translated it for me, but I don't know that I got the drift of it. What's that about pulling a sword out of a sheath and then fighting this King Harald?"

"It seems there's a sword stuck into a sheath somewhere," I answered. "Nobody has been able to pull it out. Probably it's fused or welded. If we can't pull it out we fight in the tournament."

"Darn nonsense," said Ralph uneasily.

"Yes, but see here, Ralph," I said earnestly. "You're going to pull the sword from the sheath. Or else you'll fight Harald. And you'll beat him.

"You've got the strength and you've got the courage. Don't I remember seeing you win that broadsword bout at college?

"Well, these folks aren't a patch on us moderns in any form of athletics. That's all well- established by statistics.

"And you're going to win a throne, and the princess."

He looked at me curiously.

"You're a good chap, Eric," he said. "Lots of men would have wanted to do these things themselves."

"Not me," I answered, looking down at my puny limbs.

But, in fact, my muscles had acquired a considerable development during our long ocean trip. I had to acknowledge that, physically, I was a very different man from the neurasthenic being who had sailed from New York aboard the Editha in the beginning of summer.

Something of my father's great strength—of which my mother had told me—seemed to have crept into my limbs under the influence of sun and open air; so that I was constantly surprised at the feats I found myself capable of accomplishing.

But sun and winds could never cure the shrinking from danger, the timidity of one born with my inherited nerves, the legacy of my mother's sufferings.

Ralph got up and yawned. At that moment he seemed to me the embodiment of strength and fearlessness. I looked at him proudly as we stood together in the door of the marquee.

I saw that the space about the lists was black with people, gazing curiously toward us. As we appeared shouts rang out, and good Anglo-Saxon cheers, odd enough, but very comforting. Great must have been the hopes that had been builded upon our advent.

Suddenly, parting the crowd, there came a flashing figure on horseback, which resolved itself into that of a woman. She was clad in armor, and in her hand she held a little whip and, as she rode, she plied it unmercifully upon the

heads of the populace.

CHAPTER X.

The Oath of Bjorn.

STRAIGHT toward the barrier of the tilting-field the rider came, and, putting her mount to the leap, crossed it and came cantering toward us.

She was clad in shining mail, and her long, fair, unbound hair streamed behind her. To my amazement I recognized Editha.

She made her horse rear not two paces away, and looked contemptuously at me, not recognizing me, and then at Ralph.

"Hail, stranger *theows!*" she cried contemptuously. "Hail to Odin's land! To-morrow ye shall taste the pleasures of the sacrifice, ye Anglian rabble from a far country!"

Then, still looking at Ralph, her eyes seemed to soften.

"But perchance this tall fellow will become Odin's man and a follower of my Lord Harald," she said more kindly. "No doubt two victims will suffice to appease Odin's wrath. What sayest thou, *theow?*"

I was astonished to see Ralph go boldly toward her, and, placing his hand on her horse's neck, begin to converse with her in low tones.

And evidently she understood—though, quite clearly, she neither recognized him nor remembered the scene of the night previous. She understood, for now they were talking together, and her head was bent toward his, and there was a pleased and cruel smile upon her face.

What a diplomatist my friend was!

I went back into the tent. Nobody wanted to see me there, and I guessed the sight of me might infuriate Editha and undo the clever work that Ralph was evidently accomplishing on our behalf.

I saw Bjorn standing in the middle of the tent, looking out at them. As I came in he turned and placed his hands on my shoulders, looking earnestly into my eyes.

"Eric," he said, "my friend now and no more my master—listen to me! Once, long ago, when the second sight came upon me, I saw three faces, as in a mirror.

"One of them was that of yonder woman, and it turned toward mine and

cried to me to come and help her from the witchcraft that bound her. The second was yours.

"That is why I knew, when I saw you in the flesh, that I must follow you till death. Only, my friend, beware of the third face, for on it I saw guile and selfishness, betrayal and broken faith. And the third face was his."

He looked toward Ralph Wiston.

"Nonsense, Bjorn!" I cried angrily. "Ralph is the best fellow in the world. We were at college together.

"I know him through and through. He has always been my friend, and he would rather die than do a dishonorable action."

But Bjorn was not listening to me. With an unconscious gesture he had thrown back his loose cloak, revealing the upper part of his body, nude save for a sleeveless vest of home-knit wool, such as the Norse fishermen wear. And for the first time I saw him thus, and stared in amazement and admiration at his mighty build.

For the man was a mass of rippling muscle, coiling and changing under a skin sleek as a panther's. It was the arms, the waist, the torso of a Hercules.

He flung his arms up with a dramatic gesture.

"By the memory of my murdered kin," he cried, "hear me, O true and living God! I swear, with Thine aid, to avenge, not in the old Norse way of blood, but by overturning the false idols in this land and establishing Thy true faith.

"As the vision came to me, so grant its fulfilment, and through me let Rangarok fall, the mighty Rangarok, as I saw in my dream, because she is accursed!"

He turned away with a sudden, confused look that reminded me of the look an his face that day aboard the Editha, when I had surprised him in his trance; and returned to his paillasse.

Presently Ralph came back. I was naturally interested in knowing what he had said to Editha.

Accomplished diplomat that he was, I had no doubt he had paved the way for a reconciliation with her, even in her morbid and unnatural condition of hypnotism, or, as we should now say, dual personality.

If we could win her over, when in that condition, the future would be much plainer sailing.

But he would not speak to me, except to give curt answers to my

questions, and, knowing that he was working for us, I forbore to ask too many. Presently the little page appeared again with our supper, much the same as the meal we had enjoyed before.

Soon night came on.

CHAPTER XI.

The Scent of a Strange Beast.

THAT was a night of the most turbulent dreams and the wildest anticipations I have ever had. I had the impression that Ralph was as sleepless as I, but that he did not wish to enter into conversation with me.

Indeed, I did not blame him. The morrow, with its doubts and fears, lay heavily on me.

First there must come the withdrawing of the sword—probably an impossible task.

Then the tilting.

Finally—what?

I guessed, from Editha's taunts, that it had reference to some hideous act of pagan ritual; and, trembling with all my cowardly terrors dominating me, I prayed that deliverance might come to us through my friend.

And I had actually begun to sleep dreamlessly at last when I was awakened by a gentle tug at my sleeve. I half started up, and then I saw the wise face of little Egbert bending over mine.

"Have no fear, Eric, but come with me," he said. "There is one who would speak with you."

And, as I hesitated, torn between my fears and my desire to awaken Ralph, he added:

"Truly, O Eric, this thing is not Troll magic, but wrought in your interests, that ye may all live and not die."

I crept after him under the lifted flap of the tent. I found myself in the presence of Editha, standing before me under the waning light of the stars, with hands clasped, very sorrowful and meek.

"O my friends," she said, "for my sake you have come here, to save me and my people; and assuredly I can hardly uphold the heaviness of my heart because of it.

"Therefore, I have summoned you, Eric, to say this: There is a secret passage underground, by following which ye may win to safety. Egbert, my counselor, shall conduct you to the shore, and place a long-boat at your

disposal, in which you shall make the fairway of the ice, and so, with reasonable chance, regain your country.

"How say ye?"

"For myself, O princess," I answered, "gladly I would accept, for I am not a fighting man, and I fear danger. But my friend, Ralph Wiston, is a man; he cannot play the coward; in his name I must answer, no."

She smiled wistfully, and there was a curious look that I could not analyze in her eyes as she watched me.

"Truly, O Eric, I think it is your custom to disparage your prowess," she answered. "Yet I thank you in your friend's name, for fear would not be meet in such a man as he, who can sway the hearts of women as the wind sways the sapling."

And again—I confess it because I aim to set down only the truth—I felt that unworthy sense of jealousy of my friend. I longed at that moment to have been cast in heroic mold.

Here was I, five feet six or seven, much the average man in strength, but with my heart thumping like a steam-hammer at the slightest danger, beginning to dream impossible things of this woman, this ideal of all that I had ever conceived.

But it was only for a moment. Shame and remorse banished the unworthy feeling. I bowed, and little Egbert spoke up briskly.

"Now, O Eric, I have to show you a wonderful thing," he said. "And, since one of you this day must meet King Harald, who is now approaching Rangarok, attend diligently. There is a trick whereby he may be overthrown even by one not of his prowess."

"It is the custom of our people only to fight fairly," I answered.

"Well spoken!" cried the princess, clapping her hands. And somehow that heartened me wonderfully. For I felt that, remote as these people were from us, the same old English sense of fair-play animated them.

"Yea," said Egbert, "but Harald knows nothing of that, for what he cannot get by force he gets by guile. It was by guile that he possessed himself of Rangarok, after he had been driven out in an uprising.

"He treacherously put to death the Lady Editha's three brothers, slaying them with the poisoned cup at a banquet in their honor."

I saw Editha turn away to hide her tears.

"Therefore," said Egbert, "have no scruples, but listen to the incredible

thing I have to say—a thing I have never yet found a man to credit.

"Nevertheless, it is a tradition among our wise men that, in the hot parts of the earth, there is to be found a beast whose nose is of such proportions that it sweeps the ground as it walks; moreover, at the end of this nose—scoff not!—there is a finger, wherewith it can pick up even the finest needle from the ground!"

He stopped and looked at me with pursed lips, as if to see what effect his story had on me.

"I have not only heard of, but have even seen such beasts in captivity," I answered.

"Nay, do not mock me," answered Egbert, "for it is well known that such is the strength and ferocity of this creature that no chain has yet been forged which will hold him.

"But know that, in ancient times, there was a wise king named Annibal, who, by his arts, tamed these beasts for battle. And such was the fear which they inspired in the horses of the army of Roum which went out to fight with him, that ever since the smell of this beast hath tamed the fiercest steed that ever strode under the saddle.

"Here, O Eric," he continued, producing a small vial from his tunic, "is a compound prepared from a portion of the body of this beast, concentrated by alchemists of old. Now this is what I shall do:

"This day, when the time comes to bring your champion the charger of King Theobald, on which he is to ride, I shall plug his nostrils, that he may smell nothing; and about his head and throat I shall rub some of this drug, whose smell is imperceptible to men, but will throw Harald's horse into a panic, and enable your champion to win the victory!

"What think you? Is this worth while, that ye may save the Princess Editha and rule the North Anglian land?"

I thought, and, as I thought, I saw the princess's eyes fixed on mine in that same bewildering fashion, which made my heart trip and hammer, and yet shamed me that I was not a man like Ralph.

And, as I thought of Ralph, wedded to her, and ruling over the kingdom, and the alternative of a shameful death, my decision was made.

I would do this unfair thing, for Ralph's and Editha's sake, taking the blame and never letting my friend know that he had come by fraud into his kingdom.

"I agree," I said.

"It is well," answered Egbert. "And now you must return, for dawn approaches, and you well know that we must not be here after sunrise. Yet there is one thing more that my Lady Editha has to say to you."

She came toward me and put her hands in mine.

"Eric, my friend," she said, "this day each of you shall play the man, according as God hath given him his part."

She pulled something woven from her bosom and handed it to me. I unrolled, a silken flag. And on the dainty fabric of white, woven with patient skill, there was a cross of red.

"My work, Eric," she said. "Under that banner your champion shall fight to-morrow."

"I shall give it to my friend," I answered.

"To your champion," she answered enigmatically. And she gave me her hand.

I kissed it in my clumsy fashion, thinking how regally she moved, and how mean I seemed beside her; and when I had let it fall, I saw her looking at me with the same enigmatical expression that I could never understand.

"He shall fight under that banner, and for me," she whispered.

"Ralph cannot lose!" I cried.

"Your champion," she responded, leaving me wondering at her persistence. And then Egbert and she were gone, leaving me staring after them; and in the east was the first blush of dawn.

I went back into the tent, to find Ralph awake and tossing upon his paillasse. As I entered he beckoned me to him.

"Where on earth have you been?" he asked irritably.

So I told him of Egbert's summons, and of my conversation with the dwarf and the Lady Editha, omitting all reference to the trick that was to be played. When I spoke of the suggested flight he caught me fiercely by the wrist.

"You mean to tell me that you refused it?" he demanded. "Eric, I can't believe you. They offered us a chance of freedom—and a return home in a ship—and you refused it?"

"What else could I have done?" I answered. "It was a hard choice, Ralph, but I wasn't going to have you called a coward."

And then and there I nearly told him of the drug.

He let my hand fall and lay back, staring at me.

“You’re a queer chap, Eric,” he said, “and plucky, too. I don’t believe there’s one man in a million would have had the grit to do that.”

“It wasn’t a case of grit,” I told him. “I did it for you, because I knew that was what you would wish; and, I tell you, it was a mighty hard thing to do.”

He nodded and mumbled something, and, covering his head with his blanket, appeared to sleep. And I lay down and waited for the dawn.

Presently, when the light was brighter, I heard a confused and distant sound from the lower city. I went out of the tent, passing down the field, beyond the colleges, and the cathedral, and the great palace.

Nobody was stirring, and none accosted me until I reached the near gateway that led upon the bridge. Then a dour-looking Norseman, armed with a pike, leaped out of an arch and leveled it at my breast.

I drew back in sudden fear, but as he made no further attempt to molest me, I stood back, looking down upon the city of Rangarok. At first I could see nothing but a low belt of clouds, veiling even the lower end of the splendid bridge.

Then, gradually, as if an invisible hand were rolling up a curtain, it lifted. I saw, first, the incredible spirals of the bridge, and then the encircling walls; then the lower city came into view, with its own walls; then the misty campaign beyond, and the mountaintops.

And I stood still, gazing at the spectacle as if I saw it for the first time.

It was awful in its magnificence; and not the least so was the mighty crest on which was perched the citadel, and the bridges, built surely by Trolls or gods, as Asgeld had told me.

The murmurs beneath me grew louder and clearer and, as, the last strands of the fog dispersed, I saw the city streets filled with a dense rabble, running beside a procession that moved along them upward toward the bridges.

I saw a company of perhaps two hundred men, giants, all of them, clad in armor that flashed back the rays of the rising sun, and wearing helmets of steel that shone with dazzling whiteness. They walked with a slow, but perfectly timed accord and carried great swords.

Before them marched a guard of perhaps fifty archers, and between the swordsmen and the archers rode a giant of a man on a milk-white steed with breast-piece and spiked frontlet.

The man himself wore chain armor which as he approached, I saw to be of links so fine that it resembled rather a coarsely woven fabric. His head was bare, and the long, red-yellow locks floated over his shoulders.

He looked about five and forty years of age, but tough as an oak, and the very prince of fighting men.

Suddenly five trumpets pealed from the battlements, the trumpeters, standing, silhouetted against the sky, like ebony statues. And the great gates swung open, and thus King Harald and his retainers came across the bridge into Rangarok.

I had stood, rapted in wonder at the sight, but now suddenly the sentry at the near end of the bridge turned on me with so menacing a look that I made a hasty retreat, to find the grounds behind me crowded with people—no doubt the students and retainer who inhabited the citadel since none had entered from the lower town.

There was a gasp of surprise as I approached them. And then, discerning my evident danger, the friendly Anglians made a lane for me, closing about me to conceal me from the sight of the approaching procession.

So I hurried, a pitiful figure, in my weather-stained New York clothes, through that crowd of dignified Anglians, through the students, in their gay robes, and the *theows* and serfs, in their leather kilts and stockings, until I found a vantage place behind a buttress, and perching on this, could see the spectacle unmolested and unnoticed by the other sightseers.

The trumpets sounded again, the near gates opened; and I saw King Theobald, accompanied by a retinue of his monks, make his way through the crowd, which parted right and left for him. As he drew near the oncoming Danes he stepped forward and parting his long sackcloth gown, bent low upon one knee, placing his hands, palms outward, above his head in apparent servitude.

And I saw the figure of King Harald step forward alone.

For a few moments the great lord of Rangarok stood motionless, surveying the kneeling crowd; then, with a gesture that was at once condescending and proud, he extended his gauntleted hands, and the humble, old Anglian king placed his between them.

And now another incident occurred which made me forget my own fears in anger and resolve. For, out of the retinue of the king, there strode the Princess Editha. Haughtily she took her stand at Harald's side and put forth her own hands as Harald had done. And the meek old king put his hands between his daughter's in token of submission.

I ground my teeth at that, and my face was suffused with blood. I felt an invincible determination to end the spell which the Troll devil had wrought in

her.

I stepped out of my hiding-place-into the arms of Bjorn, clothed in a long robe.

"Are you mad, Eric?" he cried fiercely. "How long a shrift would you have from these pagans if they caught you here outside the tilting-ground, where we cannot be harmed? Come!"

I think I made a little resistance, but he dragged me away as if I had been a child. Fortunately, so engrossed were the spectators with the scene, nobody even saw us.

As we went, he talked to me as a brother might, until I grew calm and ceased to babble. And so we found our tent again, and I saw Ralph in the entrance, with the two little pages busily fastening a long robe, similar to Bjorn's, about him.

He nodded to me absently, but did not speak. And I in turn resigned myself to the pages' ministrations, and afterward, feeling almost imposing in my robe of white linen, with its fur collar and sleeves, I tried to eat, and tried to make Ralph eat.

All the while we could see the crowd buzzing about King Harald, who was evidently going into the palace. We had just finished our meal when a gateway in the great pile opened, and we saw him come forth with his escort and enter the tent which flew the double-headed eagle, at the other end of the lists.

Then, with sudden remembrance, I reached up and fastened Editha's flag to the flag-pole of our tent, hauling upon the cord until it was in place.

All the while Ralph eyed me moodily, but did not speak. Bjorn was as silent as he. We were already hypnotized by the unreality of the scene, and by the unknown that was to come.

So there we waited, under the cross, while opposite us, King Harald's pennon fluttered and floated in the chill breeze that blew incessantly about the peak of Rangarok.

CHAPTER XII.

The Sword of Odin.

HE had not long to wait. Another gate in the palace opened, and there came out old Asgeld, with a company of Loki's priests, wearing black robes with strange devices on them in red, among which I recognized the tongues of fire, Loki being the fire-god.

They halted in military formation not far away, and then out of his tent came Harald, now in robes also, surrounded by a small company of his Danes, but unarmored. And when he had taken up his stand the multitude, which had evidently been held back till then, swarmed forward.

Then Asgeld came toward us, and with a bow that had in it something of irony, addressed us.

"Hail, strangers!" he pronounced. "This morn we shall see whether ye be, in truth they, one of whom shall pull the sword of Odin from its sheath in Loki's temple.

"And if one of ye in very truth be he, doubtless he shall rule over this land and this city of Rangarok the Mighty, which most first fall into ruins, in accordance with the prediction. Therefore, let us delay no longer, but proceed to Loki's temple, and there put this matter to the test."

As he ceased speaking I saw two trumpeters advance from where King Harald stood. They blew a blast, and immediately the multitude began to go to the temple.

Asgeld motioned to us to remain where we were; his priests formed a square about us, and King Harald advanced, surrounded by his men.

He was the kingliest-looking man that I had ever seen. Six feet five, perhaps, and a little shorter than his retainers, but built like a rock, and, in spite of his middle age, with thews of iron.

As he passed his keen, blue eyes sought our faces. They lit first upon Bjorn, and I saw a slight contempt curl the corners of Harald's mouth.

They passed to mine and passed away swiftly. King Harald took me for what I was; he was not even contemptuous.

But when he saw Ralph a little smile came upon his face, not of scorn,

but of approval, as if he saw in him a foe worthy of his prowess.

For a moment the two men faced each other. Then Harald, with a little whisper to one of his followers, had passed, and Asgeld signed to us to accompany the priests.

On we went, through the silent multitude, until, following in the wake of Harald, we reached a flight of steps carved in the black rock on which the temple stood. I perceived that, though it looked hard as granite from a distance, it was in reality tufa, or porous lava of volcanic origin.

The whole of the mighty peak was then of volcanic birth. And it was the memory, doubtless, of some prehistoric eruption which had created it, that remained in the ascription of the building of Rangarok to the Trolls or gods.

The white, round temple loomed above us, built of great blocks of hewn marble, fitted without mortar. We passed in at the entrance, a simple oblong in the mass, unornamented, and found ourselves ranged among our guards inside.

Not very large, and lit dimly by the light which filtered through slits in the walls, the building was striking in its simplicity.

The colored robes of Harald's followers, the black and red gowns of the priests were brilliant spots of color against the white of the interior walls.

In the center was a round altar, perhaps a dozen feet in diameter, looking like a huge baptismal-font, and built up above a great mass of rock, some ten feet high, carved into circular steps with a sort of premeditated crudeness that left the irregular outlines of the mass unhewn between the successive stairs.

At the top of this were perched two gigantic figures, carved out of the original mass in such a way that they formed part of the natural structure.

One was the god Odin, the other Loki. They leaned toward each other across the trough, the face of Odin majestic in its calmness, but that of the fire-god Loki wearing a jeering smile.

And with hands clasped high above their heads, the guardians of that infernal place seemed to await us.

Suddenly old Asgeld leaped forward and, taking his stand before the altar, began an invocation. The archaic words, which were probably not understood by anyone there, were incomprehensible to me, but I saw from his frantic gestures that they boded no good for us.

And as he chanted and swayed, I felt the excitement of the scene begin to possess the crowd within the temple—all Danes, and therefore inimical toward us.

I felt a tenseness in the atmosphere, I saw the looks of all fixed upon us. And just as I myself had begun to catch the contagion of the scene Asgeld ceased.

"Come, hither, O strangers," he said. "and see if ye can pluck forth Odin's sword from the sheath in which he placed it. And if ye can, assuredly, ye shall rule over this land and city."

Here Harald turned his face toward us, and I saw a sneering smile again curve his lips.

At Asgeld's invitation we ascended the stone steps until we stood upon a circular platform immediately surrounding the altar. And now my previous theory of the volcanic origin of the peak was confirmed.

For what I had taken for a flat-topped altar was a deep, circular well; and looking down I saw an infinite distance beneath, the pale, lambent glow of a subterranean fire.

It was a volcanic fire, and the cause of Loki's worship in that place.

Looking upward again, I perceived that between the two guardian gods was a flat, circular stone lid to the altar, hung on an enormous hinge, and lifted back, as one might lift back the top of a wicker basket.

And then, above the gods, something gradually came into vision which gave me the clue to Asgeld's obscure hints of the third choice, made on the way into Rangarok.

The upraised hands supported a slender pillar of bronze, above which was an enormous circular basket of wickerwork. Between the clasped fingers of the gods I saw a knob of metal.

It was the principle of the umbrella, oddly incongruous in such a scene and place, for I saw that, by pressure upon the knob, a catch would be released that would bring the basket—and its occupants—down upon the altar-top.

It was the human sacrifice to Loki; and this was the third choice, if we could neither pull the sword nor defeat Harald in the tourney.

I glanced at Ralph and saw the sudden horror on his face as he grasped the principle of this fiendish mechanism. My own must have blanched, too; and yet, suddenly I perceived something that set me wondering.

I had thought at first that the basket would fall down the well of the altar into the flames beneath. But the basket was too large for the altar.

It would merely come to rest on top of the circular walls, where no breath of fire from the subterranean flames could scorch it.

“Come hither, O strangers!” chanted old Asgeld, moving round the altar, and beckoning to us.

We had ascended on the side opposite that on which Harald was standing. As we moved round I saw that the steps, which I had thought formed a complete circle around, the rock, left a gap of about three, feet in their circumference.

Here was a great slab of rock, uncarved, having a deep fissure running down its entire length. Following this with my eyes, I saw that it seemed to be a cleft in the base of the peak itself, for the crack extended all across the stone floor of the temple, easily traced, although attempts seemed to have been made to cover it with cement.

It was a crack in the volcanic cone thrown up by some eruption, the place through which the infernal fires would leap up when next they were roused into activity.

But all these thoughts passed through my brain in a flash and were forgotten. For in the heart of the fissure, deep to the hilt, I saw a mighty sword of rusted bronze.

It was a sword that only a giant could have wielded, and the hilt was two-handed. And there it stuck in the cleft, seemingly as immovable as the solid rock itself.

“Put your hands to the sword, O strangers, and see if ye can draw Odin’s sword from its sheath,” came Asgeld’s mocking voice.

And because I did not want my own feeble efforts, coming after Ralph’s obviously vain ones, to appear an anticlimax, having thrown off my robes, I stepped forward and placed my hands upon the hilt.

As I did so a sudden hush came upon the whispering multitude.

I looked down for a moment into Harald’s face, and I saw that, for all his jeering look, he was stirred and uneasy at the memory of the old superstition.

And standing there with my arms bare and seeing the very respectable muscle that had begun to develop on me under the influence of the outdoor life, I began to acquire a respect for myself that seemed, in that instant, to change my outlook upon life. With a valiant rashness I set my hands upon the hilt and pulled.

CHAPTER XIII.

Vain Attempts to Unearth Sword

I TUGGED at Odin's sword till the veins stood out on my forehead, and the sweat poured down my face; but I never stirred it by the fraction of an inch.

I might as well have pulled at the rock.

At last I desisted, and, the moment that my hands left the hilt a great roar of laughter went up from the Danes; only to cease swiftly as Ralph came forward.

He looked at the sword, and looked at Harald, immediately beneath him. Then, with quick movement, he, in turn, had laid his hands upon the weapon.

But for all his furious tugging, there was not the smallest quiver of the blade.

Madly he pulled, his feet braced against the rock, throwing his whole weight into the work. I knew that if he failed to pull out the sword no one else could accomplish it.

And yet, if a man had ever thrust that mighty blade deep into the cleft, some man could withdraw it.

But Ralph couldn't. He, too, desisted at last, and came back to me, panting and blowing, and bathed with sweat, while again a roar of laughter rang through the temple.

I looked down at King Harald, holding his sides as he rocked to and fro in mirth, and guessed what feelings of relief possessed him.

"Twice have ye failed, O strangers," came old Asgeld's voice. "And yet there is a third of you, a silent man, and, as it hath seemed to me, your servant. Yet, since our ancient laws must be fulfilled, let him, in turn, place his hands to the sword-hilt, and see whether he can draw Odin's sword from its sheath."

Then Bjorn came forward, not with the tense eagerness that Ralph and I had shown, but with calm and measured deliberation. And, as he threw off his cloak, a gasp of awe went up from the multitude, for there stood before them a veritable Hercules.

Knotted with muscle, he stood poised like an athlete; then, quickly, he

placed his hands to the weapon and his feet against the base of the rock.

And slowly, very slowly, he gathered purchase and strength, and slowly the muscles on his body and arms tightened into knots as he brought his great strength to the work. I saw the jeer fade from King Harald's face; I saw him lean forward and stare in agonized suspense. I saw the craning heads of the courtiers and the expectancy in their eyes.

And I heard a shout of wrath come from old Asgeld's lips.

For there was a stir and a quiver in the great rocky mass. And where the rusted bronze had appeared welded into the rock, there now appeared the thinnest line of sky-blue steel.

With lips set into razor-edge, and a face flushed with blood, and cracking thews and a back arched into a bow of sinews, Bjorn tugged at the sword.

And I saw the thin line widen very, very slowly. It was still no more than the eighth part of an inch in breadth. But the sight hypnotized me. And, as I stood there, I seemed to feel the spell of the old prophecy.

King Harald and his courtiers, and Loki's priests seemed like a dream, about to be dissolved. I fancied that quivers ran through the temple floor. A mist gathered before my eyes, and Bjorn's form seemed to expand, until it grew larger than the brooding gods above.

Then suddenly, just when he had seemed to have become part of the rock, like the figures of the gods above him, just when the great arched back and the rock-hewn limbs seemed braced for the supreme effort, Bjorn relaxed his hold limply and collapsed at our feet in a dead faint.

And the yell of triumph that rang out filled the temple with a sound like crashing thunder. The mob dissolved and rushed toward us, shrieking in fury and triumph. But Asgeld's priests ranged themselves in front of us, and they made no further attempt to force their way to us.

Meanwhile Ralph and I, bending over Bjorn, rubbed his hands and limbs, and in a few moments some vestige of color began to come back into his face.

He staggered to his feet and stood, supported by us, looking down at the raging crowd beneath until, struck with awe of him, they ceased to shout and stood back.

Old Asgeld held up his arms for silence and turned toward us.

"Greatly have ye attempted to fulfil this task, O strangers," he said, "and one of you has come near to succeeding, whereby we know that the gods have laid some charge upon you. And perhaps it is their will that ye shall

come by another way into your kingdom. Therefore decide now whether ye will go straight to the end or meet King Harald on horseback in the tourney."

"What is he saying?" whispered Ralph.

I had no time to interrupt but stepped forward.

"We choose the second test, O Asgeld," I replied. "And my lord here" — I indicated Ralph— "who is our leader, will meet King Harald in the lists when you will."

I saw King Harald smile at Ralph.

"It is well said," he answered. "And, since you must be wearied by your efforts, let the tourney take place this afternoon, when you have eaten and rested. And, if your leader fail, doubtless one of you will choose to make the test with me in place of him—even this man" —he pointed to Bjorn— "if a horse be found strong enough to bear him."

I held up one hand, palm outward, in the Danish way, to signify acceptance; and then, with the priests about us, we made our way toward the temple entrance.

We emerged to find the whole ground black with a multitude of Anglians, looking up at us with eager, wistful faces. But they did not dare to cheer, and the foremost scattered in fear as King Harald and his Danes descended the steps and strode off toward their tents.

But as we neared the bottom I saw a solitary figure seated on a horse.

It was Editha.

Her fingers played about the handle of her whip, and her lips were curved into that contemptuous smile that I had seen upon her face the preceding evening.

"Hail, *theow!*" she cried, as I passed her. "To-morrow, since no woman may enter Loki's temple, they shall tell me of thy burning. Sweet shall thy cries sound in my ears as they recount them!"

To Bjorn she said nothing.

But as Ralph approached her she spurred her horse toward him in such a way as to compel him to turn aside and face her.

And, bending down over the neck of her mount, she looked him full in the eyes. There was no contempt on her face now, but a sort of anxiety, something of pathos which made me wonder whether the memory of the real woman was faintly stirring through its spell; whether she dimly recognized, even in her alternating state, the man she loved.

Or was this the result of Ralph's talk with her on the previous night, and had he something in hand, some subtle plot to save us?

I asked him nothing, for I knew it would have been useless. We proceeded to our tent, and there the pages served us with our meal, and we rested.

Oddly enough, none of us had anything to say. And, still more strangely, neither Ralph nor I nor Bjorn felt the need of speaking. As for me, I trusted Ralph with all my heart, and knew that in some way he would turn disaster into triumph, and win himself, his bride and his kingdom.

And how could there be a fairer realization of my dreams than that?

CHAPTER XIV.

In the Lists with Harald.

THE shadows cast by the sun were beginning to lengthen when the flap of our tent was lifted and there entered a figure strangely clad, accompanied by two pages.

"Greetings, my lord!" he said, addressing Ralph. "I am the Jarl Sweyn, and have been appointed by the Atheling Theobald to squire you in the tourney."

He was a young man of about five-and-twenty, with a fine and free bearing, in spite of the long, impeding robe of yellow and blue which clung about his ankles. On the front was woven a shield with the device of two long ships. It was, in fact, the beginning of heraldry, the crude stage of the joust as it was known when the ancestors of the North Anglians took their long ships and departed northward.

The little page nearest us dropped a big bundle which he was carrying, revealing a silken robe and a silk-lined cloth cap—the former to be worn over the armor, the latter under the head-piece.

"If my lord will step from the tent, he will be attended by my page, Eadwin," continued Sweyn.

Ralph hesitated and then, shrugging his shoulders, went out of the tent. The instant that he had left us Sweyn turned to me hurriedly.

"O Eric, I bring you a message from the Princess Editha," he said. "It is the bay horse that carries upon its skin the drug of Egbert.

"This much she told me just before the rising of the sun this morning. And she would have told me more, but her madness came upon her, and she knew me no longer.

"But this much I know; that, if ye fail, every effort will be made to save you from Harald's vengeance and Asgeld's cruelty, for the whole city and land reek with blood, and it is planned to cast out the Dane utterly as he was cast out before our Lady Editha's brothers foolishly fell before King Harald's treachery.

"Therefore be ye of good courage. And, if ye win, this night shall see

Rangarok purged of the Dane forever.

"Know ye that, though half of Danish blood, I am the Lady Editha's half-brother, and secretly favor the cause of the Anglians, though Harald trusts me. But there is no time for more. Only count on me and remember, whichever of you rides forth to fight, let him ride the bay."

He bowed and indicated to me to step out of the tent, which I did, followed by Bjorn.

The lists were cleared for battle. The benches, which had been empty when we entered the tent, were now packed with a multitude of dignitaries.

I saw the priests of Loki, rows of Danish nobles, in their long robes, ladies, brightly dressed in fur-trimmed gowns of silk. And in the center sat two figures that arrested my attention instantly.

One was Theobald, the mock king, under a canopy, stretching his head wistfully to view us, while his fingers moved ceaselessly upon the beads of the rosary about his neck.

Beside him sat Editha, her face, as I imagined it, suffused with excitement at the prospective combat.

Round about her and her father were arranged the ladies of the Danish court. On the row of benches beneath her squatted perhaps fifty pages.

Opposite, us, outside his tent, in full view, King Harald stood, submitting to the adjusting of his armor, while he shook and tested the long lance in his hand. Near him was his snow-white charger, already equipped from head to tail in plates of steel.

On one side of the lists Ralph was being similarly accoutered. The breast-plate had been strapped into position, the greaves and brassards fastened, and the little page was putting the silken robe over his armor.

Two horses were being led toward us. One was the bay of which Sweyn had spoken; the other was a coal-black horse, of the handsomest aspect imaginable, prancing and snorting at the prospect of the tilt, with which he was evidently no stranger.

Ralph turned toward me, and I was surprised to see the haggard look on his face.

"Bjorn won't fight," he said despondently.

"Bjorn?" I echoed.

"Yes, Bjorn!" he said, sharply. "He's the man to beat Harald, but he refused pointblank this morning on the way here. He's a coward, if ever a

man was."

"But don't you see why?" I asked him. "It's for you to beat Harald. We want to fight—both of us. But it's for a kingdom.

"And you are to rule. If Bjorn fought he would be king. And you're going to win, Ralph!"

"Damned rot!" he snarled. "I haven't any practise in this beastly game."

"But you remember the descriptions of the tourney that I used to read to you," I urged. "And how the lance must be kept level with the body. I know you'll throw him. And, Ralph, take the bay horse."

As I spoke the page led them up to us.

"I'll take the black," he answered. "What are you trying to do, Eric? Are you in league with Harald, or what? Why, the bay wouldn't bear me!"

"Ralph," I pleaded, not daring to tell him the truth lest he should denounce the trick, "take the bay. I have reasons for asking you. Believe me __"

But he shook me off with a force that sent me staggering, and, taking the helmet from the page, clapped it upon his head. And I could only stand there in anguish, watching him.

And yet, if he could beat Harald without the trick, how much the better! Perhaps his very ignorance of the joust would puzzle and bewilder the Danish champion!

As I stood watching him clamber into the saddle, Bjorn came up to me.

"Thus the ape rode to meet the lion," he said, following Ralph with his eyes as, with lance set, he cantered as fast as the heavily laden horse could go, down toward the spectators.

I shook Bjorn from me almost impulsively as Ralph had shaken me. At that moment I hated him. I hated myself, and I could only watch my friend and live in his every movement.

Ralph cantered slowly to the stand, and, reaching it, made his horse rear and doffed his casque.

A roar went up—a greeting of mingled scorn and admiration. Ralph looked the perfect cavalier, and sat his plunging steed as gallantly as any knight that ever tilted.

Intoxicated by the plaudits of the crowd, although they were all his enemies—at least, in the grand stand, he made his mount caracole around the field, and so came back to where his page awaited him at the end of the lists.

King Harald, opposite, had in the meantime clambered upon his horse, and sat there like a statue, watching Ralph, but not attempting to imitate him. When Ralph had taken up his position, however, he rode slowly down the lists and halted in front of the grand stand.

Such a roar of applause went up that it almost deafened me.

"King Harald our King! Hail King Harald, lord of Danish Rangarok!" they shrieked.

The edge of the barrier, crowded with Anglians, uttered no sound, but a wave of movement seemed to pass, over them, as if the agitation was unbearable. And, indeed, it is not often that a kingdom is fought for on the tilting-field.

The little page, climbing up to Ralph's knee and standing with one foot in his stirrup, was now adjusting his helmet, tightening the strap and pulling the vizor down.

Meanwhile Harald had ridden back and had had his helmet similarly adjusted. Each of the combatants held his lance couched and shield on arm, and I saw a herald rise from King Theobald's side and place a trumpet to his lips.

He blew a long blast and the contestants started slowly toward each other from the ends of the lists, riding on opposite sides of the low barrier. The slow amble of the horses, the sight of the steel-cased figures, the one in plate armor, the other in armor of chain, with their lances held slanting-wise across the body—terrible momentum, bulk without speed, fascinated me. I comprehended now what I had never understood before—how much of dexterity and how little of chance went to the winning of the joust.

But before the contestants met there came an astounding and altogether unexpected diversion.

For a large marquee situated near Harald's tent suddenly collapsed, and out of it came the most extraordinary figure that can possibly be described.

It was a man, about seven feet in height, mounted with legs so long that they reached to his horse's knees. He wore a party-colored robe of yellow and black, a tin casque nodded on his head, and he held before him a battered tin shield about the size of a small tea-tray.

Carrying a twenty-five foot lance by the middle, the point concealed in the heart of an enormous turnip, with legs stuck out at an absurd angle, he urged his raw-boned palfrey to a furious gallop, while a roar of such volume as I had heard only once before, burst from his lips.

He dashed past Harald and toward Ralph, shouting.

"Hear ye folks of Rangarok! I am the hero of Knut, terrible in battle, dreaded by the gods, served with terror on bended knees by King Harald, my slave.

"I am Knut! Whoso hears me trembles! Whoso sees me dies of fright before my club Knaveslayer has touched him! Make way, ye *theows*, for Knut the Terrible!"

And, doubling up his long legs until his huge spurs pricked the belly of his beast, he dealt Ralph a terrific blow with the turnip-point as he galloped past.

Ralph, taken by surprise, fell flat from his horse, and, unable to rise, lay prostrate in the mud of the tilting-field, while there went up howl upon howl of derision from the packed benches. In the midst of the uproar Knut turned his horse and galloped back, shouting his own praise.

My heart was filled with a great gust of shame and pity for Ralph. If I had but remembered! I knew that it had been the custom in the early days of chivalry, before men took their knighthood too seriously, to begin the joust with some surprise trick on the part of the court fool for the amusement of the spectators.

If I had but warned Ralph!

But he had been taken by surprise. It was my fault that he cut so pitiable a figure, rising now out of the mud with the help of the little page.

Meanwhile King Harald waited, lance in rest, as if courteously prepared to give battle when his opponent was remounted.

I looked to see Ralph fight the more fiercely for the insult. But he seemed too indignant to participate further in the tourney.

As the little page led the horse up to him he dealt the boy a blow that sent him to the ground, and, ignoring the shouting spectators, plucked off his casque, flung it down, and strode off the field.

Yells of derision broke forth from the spectators on the stand. I saw the white head of Theobald droop lower as he sat unnoticed among the cheering Danes.

I heard a groan go up from the populace around the field. And I saw Ralph's white face and heaving shoulders as he pushed his way past me toward our tent.

It was a phenomenon that I had noticed at college; physically the bravest of men, humiliation took the heart out of him; he was too sensitive to endure

it or to avenge it.

I knew not one man in a thousand would understand. They would call him a coward. It was this, and not the thought of our fate, that whipped my own coward's blood into courage.

Nor did the remembrance of the drug come to me at that moment, but as Ralph sullenly tore off his armor and flung it down at the tent entrance, I picked up the pieces and carried them to where the second page stood, holding the bay.

He began to accouter me. I heard murmurs of surprise about the field, and interpreted these as indicating that Bjorn and not I should have succeeded Ralph.

Perhaps so—but Bjorn should have his chance. I was mad with grief for my friend, and it was my privilege to avenge the shameful wrong that had been put upon him.

It seemed hardly a moment before I was clad in armor. The casque was placed upon my head and I was galloping down the lists in the long shadows which the palace was already casting over the field to where King Harald sat his horse, his helmet in his hand, watching me in mild surprise.

And I think my madness must have lent me a fictitious dignity, for in place of the howls of mirth that should have come from the grand stand there was only a murmur, a hush of surprise, and then, to my astonishment, a cheer such as the sport-loving Dane bestows on a worthy enemy.

It kindled the blood in me.

I galloped toward King Harald and shook my lance at him, shouting I know not what in good New York English.

Instead of sneering, he bowed courteously, turned and rode back toward his end of the lists, putting on his helmet as he rode.

I turned also and so we faced each other a hundred feet apart at opposite ends of the lists, with the barrier between us.

The herald arose. I heard his blast and half expected to see the figure of Knut come dashing out of the tent again. Instead came Harald, at a businesslike canter, which gradually became a gallop.

I couched my lance and rode at him, and as he neared me I thrust violently.

His horse reared, throwing him back, and my lance-point, catching him full in the breast, which shivered into atoms. The sudden movement of his mount sent his own thrust obliquely across my chest.

I felt the terrific impact, and pirouetted in my saddle like a marionette.

For an instant I felt nothing under me; then I found my seat and was careening wildly down the field beyond him.

And not a sound came from the packed benches. I learned afterward that it was seldom indeed that Harald failed to unseat his opponent at the first thrust. But for the movement of his steed he would have flung me from the saddle.

I wheeled and drew the sword which hung from my saddle. I saw Harald turn and draw his also. And we rode toward each other again.

Suddenly the packed seats became ablaze.

"Kill him!" they shrieked, standing up and cheering their king. They howled death at me.

It only stimulated me to greater rage. I saw Editha standing beside her father, her arm outstretched, invoking curses on me. I saw the flashing circle of King Harald's blade.

I saw it move toward me like a lightning flash. Just what happened I do not know, except that a moment later Harald was reeling in his saddle, while his horse snorted and plunged, and half of his crest was shorn away.

And where the two pieces on my left arm met there was a great dent in the steel, and my arm felt numbed and helpless.

Again we were turning and facing each other with swords ready.

I lost all but the haziest glimmer of what was taking place. I know I wielded the heavy sword as if it were a feather, seeing before me now the dishonored look on Ralph's face and now the sneering lips of Editha.

I was striking madly and receiving blows and recking nothing of them.

There was blood on my arms and blood on my steel, and blood on my enemy's face. And to my dawning amazement I was pursuing a fleeing enemy on a panic-stricken horse all up and down the barrier, while he sought to control his mount and to escape my blows, as his own became the feebler, as mine grew stronger.

And then, just as King Harald got his horse under control and raised his sword aloft to make an end of me, I thrust full into his vizor. Off came his helmet and down he dropped from the saddle, prone on the ground, while the fleeing horse dashed down the lists, and sought its stable.

I sat still, thinking it all a dream, and not a sound came from the packed tilting-field.

CHAPTER XV.

Eric Is Proclaimed King.

NOR from the cloth-covered seats, nor any movement. All was so still that old Theobald's fingers, pulling at the beads of his rosary, were distinctly visible to me.

And then all was dissolved in a great roar as the excited Anglians swarmed over the field, with knives and clubs and staves, shouting death to the Danes.

At the same moment King Harald's men gathered about him and rushed forward toward me. But the Anglians had reached me first. They formed a solid wall about me, in which I could not move. Backward and forward surged the packed masses, hacking and hewing at each other with all the pent-up fury of the long racial embitterment.

The flashing swords of the Danes did terrible execution, but the fury of the mob was greater than their prowess. Gradually the Danes were forced backward and I saw them begin to go down, by twos and threes, as the rabble pressed forward, irresistibly.

I had seen Harald upon his feet, his face livid with fury, shouting to his men; but now as everything began to point to the victory of the oppressed people of Rangarok, he changed.

He ran to and fro unarmed, with bare hands, between the rows of combatants, shouting to them to desist, since he had lawfully been beaten.

More potent were the entreaties of old Theobald, shuffling among his monks, fearless of danger, beseeching and imploring until the riot began to die away, and only here and there small groups continued fighting.

At last these too ceased, and nothing remained of the battle but the bodies upon the field and the two ranks of scowling, menacing combatants.

Old Asgeld, looking as black as thunder, was whispering in Harald's ear, and Harald was nodding.

I slipped down from my horse and, to my surprise, found Bjorn on one side of me and the Jarl Sweyn on the other. They began to take off my armor.

"Bravely done, my lord," whispered Sweyn in my ear. "But the test is yet

to come, for Harald is planning treachery."

"It was by treachery I won," I answered, in sudden remembrance.

He laughed in a manly way that seemed to reinvigorate my soul, already shrinking back to its modest dimensions.

"I know all about the drug of Egbert," he answered. "And know that it was no worse than the black deeds of Harald, for he fought like you for a crown, but you fought for your lives as well."

While he was speaking Harald had advanced into the open space between the two ranks of men. Now I perceived that in his hand he held a plain circlet of gold.

"Harken ye men of Rangarok!" he cried in ringing tones that were audible all over the plain. "This day in fair fight have I been overcome by Eric the Anglian. Wherefore, since I am a peace-loving lord, I resign my throne and my bride Editha, daughter of your liege Theobald, to him who has conquered me, in accordance with our immemorial statutes."

I gasped in dismay. This was something that I had not bargained for. I shivered as Harald, towering over me, placed the bold circlet on my head.

And, taking off his silk robes, he wrapped them about me.

I looked for Ralph wildly, but I could see him nowhere in the press. And already Harald was leading the Princess Editha by the hand toward me.

"She is for Ralph," I whispered to Sweyn in agitation.

He only smiled.

"Verily, for so valiant a fighter, my lord has the least insight of any whom I have known," he answered.

Editha came toward me, pale as death.

I looked into her expressionless face, and the thought of winning her was at once maddening and distressing. I would have given everything in the world at that moment to have been back among my books in my rooms near the Metropolitan Museum.

She placed her hand in mine. And a great shout went up from the mob.

Only the Danes, headed by old Asgeld, were whispering and muttering together. Looking at Harald, I saw foam and blood on his lips, and the smile on his face was forced and unnatural.

"And now," he cried, "since the feast for the victor has already been set in the palace, let us eat and drink before the sun goes down!"

He turned and strode away. There was a simultaneous movement toward

the palace, but nearly all those on the benches stopped to look at me.

I caught admiring glances from highborn ladies—I who had never won a woman's glance before. A little circle of Sweyn's followers had gathered about me, keeping back the mob, and thus we were drawn, rather than proceeded, into the great banquet hall of Theobald's palace.

A long table ran the entire length, divided in the center by a mighty dish bearing a crudely formed pyramid of rock salt. Huge drinking cups were ranged all along the boards, which were heaped with mounds of black bread.

At intervals, upon the benches which ran on either side of the table, were barrels of beer, which the thirsty Danes, laughing as they sat down, were already broaching.

There were no women at the banquet, with the exception of Editha, and I noticed that those invited seemed evenly divided between Danes and Anglians, distinguishable only by their dress.

I was escorted to the head of the table, with Editha on my right hand and King Theobald on my left. Next to Editha was seated Sweyn, but Harald had placed himself, as if in humility, in one of the lowest of the seats above the salt.

At first I could see neither Bjorn nor Ralph. But, searching the table, at length I discovered them. Bjorn below the salt, as if he were a serf, and Ralph upon the opposite side, among a group of Danish nobles.

He was whispering to one of them, who seemed to be interpreting his words to the others, and there was a great nodding of heads. His humiliation was evident, and when at last I caught his eye, he looked away.

The equivocal nature of my position maddened me, for it was my purpose to rise and renounce the crown in my friend's favor; and yet it seemed the most difficult thing in the world to do, and none the less so with Editha at my side.

I saw her eyes fixed on mine in sullen hate, there was a mock humility in her words, and once I caught her and Ralph exchanging a meaningful glance.

The feast went on. Butlers brought in great haunches of meat and heads of boars, and carved great pieces for the feasters, who impaled them on their daggers and gnawed, relieving the enormous meal by constant drafts from the great flagons at their sides.

Theobald sat silent beside me, looking wistfully at me but saying nothing. Outside the setting sun was staining the college walls with fire.

As the feast went on the merriment grew wilder, and it seemed to me that

it was the Anglians, rather than the Danes, who drank.

I ate little, watching helplessly, feeling as if I were dreaming. Presently I became aware that the, until then, silent king was addressing me.

"O Eric," he said, "art thou in very truth of our faith, and dost thou pledge thyself to pull down the pagan altars and restore the White Christ to Rangarok?"

"So I pledge myself," I answered.

"And dost thou know the spell that lies upon my daughter, the princess, and wilt thou use all means to overcome it?"

"Truly I will," I answered. "But how is this evil spell to be overcome?"

"There is none can remove it save she who placed it on her—Haggudra, the Troll queen," he answered. "O Eric, I fear treachery from Harald, for it is not his wont to yield freely when he is beaten.

"Moreover, he is fuller of wiles than the fox. I am an old man and I have seen my day. And whether thou rule in Rangarok, or another, I do not greatly care, save for my people and for our faith.

"But for one thing I care, and that is that my daughter's soul is held in evil bondage. Therefore, swear to me that thou wilt find Haggudra, in the city of Trolls, which none may discover, and compel her to remove the curse, by Odin's sword, which alone has power against her enchantments."

"That I will do, if Odin's sword can be drawn from the rock which holds it fast," I answered. "But how can this be done?"

"I know not," he answered wistfully. "But this I know, that the curse was laid upon Editha for as long as Odin's sword remains in its scabbard."

Suggestion, of course!

I saw the deviltry of it. For, once this was impressed on the child's mind, it would grow until it became as firm as Odin's rock-scabbard itself. Thus Haggudra held Editha in hypnotic bondage for her own evil purposes, and nothing but the withdrawal of the sword could remove the spell.

Bjorn should withdraw it yet. I vowed that.

And, while I was yet planning, I became aware that a sudden quiet had fallen over the assembly, and Editha's eyes were fixed on Harald's in an unspoken message—or the receipt of one.

The waiting serf had handed her a drinking horn—a huge stag's antler, tapering like a scimitar between her fingers, and brimming to the top with wine.

She rose, pale as the dead, and stood before me, her eyes fixed upon mine.

"It is the custom, my dear lord," she said, "among our people that, when pledged in marriage, the bride and her husband-to-be shall drink the betrothal cup together, whereby their union becomes holy and can never be broken. Therefore let my lord drink with me."

And as I arose, doubting and wondering, she added:

"Let my lord have no fear that the cup is poisoned, for in such manner we women do not treat our husbands. And, in proof of this, I will drink first, as is also our rule."

Setting her lips to the horn, she drank. Then she handed it to me.

I took the horn and became aware that a hush as of death had fallen upon the assemblage. All were watching me, with eyes wide with expectation. I caught a glance from Sweyn.

He was signaling something to me, but I could not understand it. It was a warning and yet it did not seem to signify that the cup was poisoned.

There was still the red glow of the sun upon the buildings opposite, but inside the banquet hall, lit, like all the Rangarok structures, only by small slits in the walls, it had grown so dark that I could scarcely discern the eyes fixed on mine. I held the cup on high.

"Why does my lord hesitate?" asked Editha, artlessly. "Surely my lord, who is so brave and valiant and has overthrown the mighty Harald, has no fears of a woman?"

She was leaning toward me, and now the thought that she was to be mine made me dizzy. I forgot my caution; I saw only her blue eyes fixed on mine with tenderness, and her face, fairer than any woman's that I had known.

At that instant a shaft from the setting sun pierced a slit in the wall, disclosing the gold of Editha's hair.

I raised the horn to my lips to drink. And the wine spurted into my face from a concealed aperture in one side, with the force of a syringe.

It was a trick horn, such as were often used in olden days at banquets.

I dropped the horn; unconsciously my hands went up. But in that instant the ray of the sun, passing and fading, revealed to me something more than Editha's hair, and just in the nick of time.

It was a little dagger in her hand, similar to the one which I had unwittingly carried away with me from on board the caravel.

And, before I had recovered my footing, she struck at me with all her strength.

I had just time to wheel aside. The blow glanced, ripped my robes, and only the hilt bruised my shoulder.

Instantly the banqueters had leaped from their places and, before I understood what was happening, I heard the hall ring with the dreaded battle cry of the Danes.

A score of swords had flashed from hidden places and, one by one, the unsuspecting Anglians were struck down.

A mob of men came at me. But somehow a little knot of Anglians intervened; and then I found Sweyn at my side, passing me a sword from beneath his garments, and Bjorn upon the other side, keeping the Danes at bay with another.

For the Danes were not the only ones who had come armed to that treacherous feast.

They were two to one, and, with their massive build and greater strength, invincible. Moreover, they were fighting with the consciousness that their rule depended upon the issue.

Our chance of escape looked infinitesimal. I saw Harald's face, fiery with rage, across the shoulder of the man whose blows I was parrying.

"This for thee, upstart!" he shouted, dealing a terrific blow at me, which would have cleft my skull in two but for the intervening arm of my immediate antagonist, fortunately for me just then suddenly raised for a blow.

The sweep of Harald's sword cut the limb from the body. The man dropped, screaming, to the floor.

I thrust in turn, but missed.

The jostling throng came between us. And so we fought in the dark banquet-hall, while old Theobald cried his prayers from a far corner, his piping voice rising high and shrill over the battle-sounds, the clash of sword on sword, and the shouting.

In the melee it was difficult to raise one's arm; it was by sheer weight that they bore us backward, and one could hardly tell friend from foe in the darkness.

Sweyn never left my side, and, with Bjorn, turned many a blow aimed at me. Ralph I could not see anywhere. I was growing desperately weary.

We had retreated behind a barricade formed of overturned benches and

the long table, and had a moment's breathing space as the Danes drew off and gathered for the finale. Of a sudden I felt my arm plucked from behind. I turned, to see Editha at Sweyn's side.

"Eric!" she cried; and I saw that the sane mood had come upon her. "What means this? But this moment, it seems, I awoke from a dream to find myself in the heart of this fighting."

She spoke wildly, she glanced at me as if panic-stricken. Behind the table the Danes were very quiet. They were planning the rush. There were not more than a dozen of us remaining.

Editha, hidden by Sweyn, had not been seen by them.

"It means treachery, O Lady Editha," answered Sweyn, "since Eric overthrew King Harald in the tourney to-day. Go swiftly, before harm come to you."

There was no time for her response, for, with a ringing shout, the Danes were upon us again, swarming over the barricade. And this was our end.

I was flung from my feet by the impact of a sword that beat mine from my hand and numbed my arm. I staggered, stumbled, and went down beneath a heap of combatants, fighting furiously above me.

And, just when the end seemed imminent, there came shouts from without, the sudden rush of a multitude; and into the banquet-hall streamed a mob of Anglians who fought against Harald and his men.

Thereafter all was utter confusion. I heard Harald shouting to rally his followers, and the sweep of his great sword, followed by the screams of his victims, as he fought his way toward the entrance, surrounded by his phalanx.

I heard it dimly, for my senses were leaving me. But suddenly I was plucked from the ground from under the struggling heaps above me.

Bjorn held me by the arm, and Editha was beside him. Behind her I saw old Theobald, unharmed.

"Eric, the Princess Editha knows of a way to safety," Bjorn was screaming in my ear. "Quick, now, since we are almost the last remnant of our party, and there is no need for us to remain."

"Where's Sweyn?" I muttered.

"He has gone ahead of us," whispered Editha—at least, it sounded a whisper, though it must have been almost a cry. "Come, for Harald can put down this half-armed rabble, and by dawn will once more reign in Rangarok.

"Come! It is a way known only to me, learned from Haggudra. For once,

when consciousness came upon me suddenly at nightfall, the old witch had been late on her road, and was bringing me back this way into the palace.

"I feigned to know nothing, but I remembered it and told it to Sweyn. Come quickly, Eric!"

Half-protestingly I allowed myself to be drawn away. As we passed the old king I pulled at him and made a gesture with my hand; but, if he understood, he only shook his head, and, huddled up in an angle of the hall, counted his beads and muttered his prayers.

At the far end of the hall was a heavy door of dwarf oak, clamped strongly with iron bars, whose ends seemed welded in the solid stone of the palace wall. Evidently, wherever it led, the passage had not been used for ages, for I could just make out the rust that had crept into the crevices between the blocks, where the ends of the bars rested.

If any key could open that door, there was no time to prove it, for the yells of the combatants outside the palace presaged Harald's victory, and in the banquet-hall, now half deserted, men were struggling to their feet, cursing their wounds and already falling on one another.

In another moment our little group of three would be detected.

But Editha raised her hand and touched a secret control somewhere in the wall. And suddenly I saw that, while the door remained, a great slab of stone had turned slightly askew, leaving just space enough for us to squeeze our way past it.

Editha beckoned to me, and I followed her, with Bjorn behind me. Hardly had we passed through when the wall swung back again, leaving us in utter darkness.

CHAPTER XVI.

Sweyn Leads the Anglians.

I FOLLOWED Editha, and Bjorn followed me, and for half an hour, as it seemed, we went on, with many twists and turns, until at last a glimmer of moonlight showed in front of us.

Then Editha turned and came back to me.

"Stoop low," she said, "for now we leave the tunnel and pass through the earthen bank of the river."

The smell of mold began to be perceptible; in another moment we were clambering through a muddy passage, then brushing aside a growth of weeds and rank grass; and suddenly we emerged into a marshy swamp beside the banks of a broad, gently flowing stream.

I looked up and saw the mighty citadel above me, and around us open country, with an occasional small cabin dotting the waste. We had come out on the other side of Rangarok.

Beneath us the city stretched away, and I could see the black line of the wall; but the region where we now were was un-walled, being evidently almost impassable.

As I stood there, stupefied at the transition from the banquet-hall, I heard a voice behind me. I turned quickly, and there stood Sweyn, smiling at me.

"All is prepared," he said. "Had you lost to Harald, to-night Rangarok would have been stormed and you set free, or at least avenged. Now we can await our time, for outside of Rangarok no rood of ground remains to the oppressor."

And briefly he acquainted me with the fact that the whole country had already risen against the Danes, that Harald's power was gone, and that we were to take up our quarters in the Anglian camp, ten miles away, where the rebels' standard had already been set up, and whither the countrymen were flocking by thousands.

We moved along the river-bank, treading what seemed a secret path among the morasses, for when I moved ever so little aside from the trail I found myself enmired immediately.

And now our path turned sharply away from the river, along a narrow valley between two ranges of hills, still impassable, except along the course that Sweyn showed us. Presently, looking back, I perceived the lights of Rangarok behind us, and knew that we had passed the city walls and were on our way to freedom.

Our road became firm ground, and we walked for mile after mile, until the capital was hidden behind the rolling hills through which we had come. Suddenly a voice challenged us, and out of the darkness sprang an archer, with arrow fitted to his bow-string.

Sweyn answered him, and he stood aside with a salute, to let us pass. A hundred yards farther we were challenged again.

And then, as we topped an elevation, the moonlight disclosed an open camp among the hills, packed with black goatskin tents.

We passed along a road between these, through crowds of Anglians, busy stringing bows, tempering pikes in fires, furbishing armor; through lines of tethered horses; through all the paraphernalia of an encamped army, until we reached an open space about a large marquee, that flew the red cross on white, with smaller tents about.

"These are our quarters, Eric," said Sweyn. "To-morrow we and our chiefs hold a council of war to determine our plans. To-night we are still arming and equipping our followers."

The space was surrounded by armed men. The sight of the quiet and resolute way in which Sweyn's orders were obeyed, with the innate genius of the Anglo-Saxon for discipline, told me the rebellion had been well planned, and encouraged me more than anything else could have done.

"And Editha?" I asked in a low tone.

He understood my meaning.

"The Lady Editha must come and go as she wills," he answered. "Since, in her wild mood, she remembers nothing of the night's doings, she can betray no secrets. At night she is heart and soul with her people; by day she wanders among the Trolls, or where she wishes, unrestrained. There is no danger, for all fear her madness as the act of God; but she would do herself an injury if we tried to hold her."

While I spoke I saw Editha standing at the entrance to one of the tents. It was evident that she had visited the camp before, and was well acquainted with it, and had her quarters here. She had heard nothing of my remarks, or Sweyn's, and, as I approached her, smiled and extended her hand to me

again.

"Be sure, O Lady Editha," I said, "that Ralph is unharmed, and that, so soon as the citadel is taken, he shall be restored to you."

She looked at me in that strange manner of hers.

"Was it not thou, then, O Eric, who overthrew King Harald?" she asked.

"It was I indeed, thanks to Egbert's stratagem," I answered. "And, by another trick, Ralph was unhorsed; but not in fair fight.

"But neither the one trick nor the other, has any significance, for it is my dearest wish to bring him to you, to be your husband, and rule with you over Rangarok."

She still watched me searchingly, with parted lips; then she frowned; and suddenly a ripple of laughter began to play about her beautiful mouth.

"Verily, thou art a true friend, O Eric," she said. "I thank thee more than my tongue has power to utter, and, when thy friend Ralph and I are wedded thou shalt be our faithful councilor."

And, without extending her hand to me again, she turned away and went into her tent.

But, for all my confident speech, my heart was very sad as I went back to the council tent, for I had no doubt that Ralph had been one of the first to fall in the combat.

For two hours I listened while they discussed their plans for equipping their followers and feeding them, and the general methods to be pursued, leaving the details for the morrow.

I understood that the plot against the Danes was of long standing; preparations had actually been made for months, though the rally to the rebel headquarters had only begun a day or two before.

Harald must, therefore, have been aware of what was brewing, but it was unlikely that he would attack, or be in a position to do so, even if he regained the power in Rangarok, until he had summoned his followers from the outlying garrisons.

In consequence there might be expected to be a lull of at least a week, during which time the Anglians could be armed, and preparations made for the construction of siege weapons.

I listened to the plans of the councilors, who turned to me now and then for my approval, though more as a formality than anything else.

Somehow I gathered, from their manner, that I was regarded, by virtue of

my victory in the lists, as the leader of the Anglian party; but that this was a nominal role: I was to be a mere figurehead, used for their convenience, while Sweyn would actually rule.

For myself I cared nothing, but the thought of Ralph, dead and robbed of his rights, was too bitter for words. And so I sat and listened idly, my thoughts weaving a fantastic web of possibilities now past and gone, and my spirits sinking momentarily.

Suddenly there were cries outside, the sound of a horse's hoofs upon the plain, challenges and replies. Then the tent flap was flung open, and a sentinel appeared and ushered in a horseman splashed with mud and breathing heavily.

"Well, Wolf, Ethelred's son?" demanded Sweyn, springing to his feet and looking at the man anxiously.

"Harald still rules in Rangarok, and the Danes have triumphed over us," he answered.

Sweyn nodded and dismissed him. The news was what he had expected, and all our plans had been with that in view. Nevertheless, this brought about another half-hour of animated conversation before the council broke up.

Sweyn conducted me to my tent, and stopped for a few moments before saying good night, to ask the cause of my despondency.

When I told him he looked away. "Such is the fortune of battle, Eric," he answered. It stung me.

"Light words for such a loss!" I answered heatedly. "Was it not he who was to reign over Rangarok?"

"Who chose him?" answered Sweyn. "Know, my lord, that we are a free people and choose our own lords; and, since you did overthrow Harald, and have, besides, other qualities of leadership unknown to you, we have chosen you."

"Your words are fair, Sweyn," I answered bitterly; for his coldness over my friend's death had changed my depression to a rankling anger. "But, since the Princess Editha is the daughter of your King Theobald, and chose Ralph to be her husband, who shall set her choice aside?"

He smiled frostily, and I caught a gleam of amusement in his eye, for which I could discern no cause.

"You speak as if your leader Ralph still lived," he answered. "And yet just now you reproached me for not grieving over his death."

"Alive or dead," I answered, "the Princess Editha has chosen him, and

furthermore—”

But I said nothing more, for an overpowering idea had begun to take root in my brain.

If the Princess Editha could regain her sanity, the half-contempt in which she was held would yield to reverent homage. And then, if Ralph lived, his rights would be insured.

Otherwise, she and I would be powerless to thwart Sweyn’s evident resolve to disregard his rights. On the thousandth chance that Ralph was alive I determined to attempt a desperate plan in his behalf.

Bjorn had sat in the tent in his silent way, and had remained in the background while I talked with Sweyn. As Sweyn turned away I went up to him and poured out my bitterness.

“O Eric,” he said, his hand upon my shoulder, “be satisfied with what fate brings you. Truly, our fates are woven by the Norns, and cannot be set aside. Therefore, cease to be troubled.”

“You were never Ralph’s friend,” I retorted. “But this matter, whether he is alive or dead, may well rest, as you suggest, since now we cannot know.

“Only I am resolved that the Princess Editha shall wander no longer from camp to camp and from city to city, despised because of her affliction.”

“What would you do, then, Eric?” he asked.

“Compel the witch Haggudra to lift the spell.”

“Not thus shall the Lady Editha regain her soul,” he answered.

“Nevertheless, Bjorn,” I answered, “this very night I mean to take her to the witch and force Haggudra to lift the spell. It’s all hypnotism, Bjorn, that’s all.

“And that devil who put the suggestion on her will take it off, or I’ll force her to do so. Give me your sword!”

I had lost mine in the affray in the palace. Bjorn let me take his without demur. I was so keyed up by my sudden decision that I hardly knew what I was doing; everything was subordinated to my purpose.

“How will you find the Trolls’ city, O Eric?” he asked, looking at me in his grave manner. “And, if you fail to return, who shall lead us?”

“You, Bjorn,” I answered.

And I saw by the sudden flush upon his face, and the confusion in his manner, that I had touched some hidden spring of motive in him.

But I was not troubling about that.

Of a sudden Bjorn's demeanor changed. He laid his hand fraternally upon my shoulder.

"Go, Eric, since I foresee the end, and peace rest with you!" he answered.

I went to Editha's tent. And then I hesitated for the first time, for it was altogether incongruous—and how could I wake the girl from sleep, or even enter the frail goatskin shelter while she was there?

But suddenly, like a great dog on guard, a little form started up from before the flap and looked up at me with pursed lips and wise, wrinkled eyes.

It was Egbert, the dwarf; I might have known that he would not be far from his mistress.

"What does my lord desire?" he asked.

I clapped him heavily upon the shoulder.

"A horse," I answered, "that will carry two people to the city of the Trolls. And thee, to run beside us and act as guide."

He pursed his lips more prominently, looking up at me with his meditative stare.

"Not in this way shall the Lady Editha regain her soul," he answered, quoting Bjorn so exactly that I was staggered for the moment.

"You know the way, Egbert," I pleaded.

"I know the way, my lord," he answered; "but I dare not lead you thither, for I am myself of the Troll people, and to break the oath I swore would bring disasters not alone upon the Trolls but upon Rangarok."

"You can direct me."

"Verily, my lord, without the orders of Haggudra, the wise woman, I may not do that either. Yet there is one thing that I can do.

"I can give my lord the sacred skein which every one of the Troll people wears night and day about his arm. Following this, you shall win to the Trolls' city. And yet I counsel my lord not to attempt it, for nothing shall be achieved."

But, as if foreseeing my response, he raised the loose cuff of his sleeve, disclosing an arm astonishingly muscular, and bound from wrist to shoulder with a thin red cord.

And he began to unwind this, first baring my arm and beginning to fasten the end of the cord, as he unwound it, about my wrist.

He ran it up to the shoulder, crossed it mysteriously several times, and

then began to wind down toward the wrist again. When he had finished he placed the loose end between my fingers, lightly binding it in such a way that I could begin to unwind it without the intervening consciousness that I was holding, it. Then he stepped back and pursed his lips again as he looked at his work.

"If you must go, my lord, this is the only way," he said. "Follow the road by which you entered Rangarok until you come to the ancient camping-ground where you halted—or follow the road east of the river until you reach the sea.

"Or, again, follow the road northward unto the highest peaks. Or, once more, ride on southward until your horse tires. Or, if it please you more, remain in Rangarok—"

"Cease with mocking me, Egbert!" I said fiercely. "Direct me on my way!"

An indignant look crossed the wise face.

"Verily, my lord," said Egbert, "it matters nothing which way you go, for any road will take you to the Trolls' city. Yet, since you must have directions, ride to the old camping-ground, and thence go eastward until you see three dwarf fir-trees, standing alone, not far away.

"Descend into the cleft between them, and remember, turn five times to the right, as you have five fingers, and then five times to the left, and then five to the right again.

"And when the skein runs out, the Trolls' city is near. Only, without the skein, there will be great difficulty in returning, for the Trolls' magic is very strong, and memory weakens in its presence,"

"But I can find my way back by the skein?" I cried.

"Yea, my lord, for no Troll dare touch the skein, so long as it be not knotted."

"An easy condition," I answered confidently, "for to knot the skein it is necessary to describe a complete circle within a space as small as the head of a pin."

"Nevertheless, see to it that no knot comes in the skein," he retorted. "And remember this especially when, under the power of the Trolls' magic, things begin to seem otherwise than as they are.

"And now do not delay, for here comes the Lady Editha, fully prepared for you."

As he spoke I heard a slight rustle, and, looking up, was amazed to see

Editha standing in the entrance to her tent.

She wore the short kilt and leggings, and carried a little whip in her hand.

"Hasten, O Eric, that we may depart," she said.

"Who told you, Lady Editha?" I asked in astonishment.

"Nay, Eric, but have you forgotten the desire you expressed recently, that in two hours I should be ready to ride with you on an adventure?" she answered.

"Truly, for a councilor, your memory is short! And see! The horse which you required of me is already at hand!" Even as she spoke a page came up, leading a magnificent steed, one of the heavy Norman breed, used to-day to drag big carts, but bred originally to carry men in complete armor. It would carry us two as easily as it would an armored man.

It had been in my mind, though I was hardly conscious of the thought, that we two should ride one horse, for otherwise, if we were overtaken by day, Editha might escape me when her madness came upon her. But the precise manner in which my plans had been telepathically conveyed to Egbert and to Editha filled me with amazement and something of fear.

And even then, as another thought came to me, Egbert interrupted.

"Mount and ride on, and have no fear," he said, "for none will stop you."

I sprang into the saddle and, bending down, lifted Editha and placed her upon the pommel before me.

I swung Bjorn's sword upon my thigh, and so we started.

Cautiously I made the horse pick his way along the outer avenue between the lines of tents, in case any evidence of undue haste might lead to a challenge. But as we passed the first sentry I saw him standing stiffly at his post, pike in hand, staring upward, and seeing nothing.

And so the second and third, and fear came upon me at this evidence of Egbert's power.

For the men stood hypnotized, their limbs and muscles rigid, and there was none to guard the camp. I thought it fortunate that the wise dwarf was friendly to Editha, and therefore to us.

Soon we had left the tents behind, and were riding along a rutted road which presently merged into another. Looking back, I saw the peak of Rangarok behind me again, and knew that it was the road on which we had ridden in with Asgeld.

The horse went at a comfortable pace, between a trot and a canter, and

maintained it without an effort; and riding thus with Editha before me, and holding her lightly, with my left arm about her, my thoughts began to stray along the paths of treachery again, despite all efforts. It seemed to me that I had done poor Ralph an immeasurable wrong, both in the tourney and in the betrothal.

And yet, the thought that she might still be mine, could I bring myself to such unfathomable baseness, made my heart beat till the blood pounded in my ears.

I loved her as the incarnation of a thousand dreams. I loved her as a woman of flesh and blood, warm in my arms. I felt the mighty surge of passion flow like a sundering river between myself and the dead man whom my thoughts dishonored. To keep rein on myself I began speaking of Ralph again.

I told her again that I was sure be was unharmed, and that I should be privileged to restore her to him.

There was a quizzical smile on her face as she turned in her seat and looked at me.

"If that be so, Eric," she said, "why dost thou ride alone with thy friend's destined bride, away from him and Rangarok?"

"Because of what I have planned, O princess," I answered. "It is my intention to take you to the Trolls' city, for which journey Egbert has given me the clue, and there to compel the witch Haggudra to remove the spell which she has cast over you."

She started in fear.

"Ride back, ride back, Eric!" she cried. "None may face the witch Haggudra and live to see the day again!"

"Rather that than have you remain bound under her spell," I answered.

But, in great fear, she strove to dissuade me, and, when I would not be dissuaded, at last she settled into silence. So we rode on for a while. Then, turning again:

"Why dost thou do this for me, Eric, seeing that I am another's?" she asked.

"Because it is my duty to my friend," I answered. "Ralph has been my true friend for years; we have been like brothers, and he has never failed me in anything. Could I do less?"

She shuddered.

“For myself I do not care,” she said. “The evil is so dire that when, at nightfall, I awaken from dreadful dreams, I fear the coming of dawn.

“But Haggudra cannot be overcome. Never may I be freed, save by the withdrawal of Odin’s sword from its scabbard. And when that comes, they say, the very peak of Rangarok shall be dissolved, and he who withdraws it shall rule the remnants of both peoples.”

“If I fail, at least I shall see to it that Haggudra bewitch no others,” I retorted, clapping my hand upon my sword.

She mused for a few moments.

“You are a brave man, O Eric,” she answered, “and a true one. And thus, for the sake of him whom you have chosen as my lord, I ride with you wherever you will.

“But, lest my madness come suddenly upon me—take this, which I always carry, to save me at the last from the arms of Harald, the deer-footed.”

And she thrust one of the little daggers into my hand.

Her hand touched mine and clung there, and, for the life of me, it was all I could do to avoid taking her in my arms. Then I heard her voice, coming as if from far away.

“For know that only he who has my heart shall be my husband, Eric.”

“And you” —I stammered— “would have killed me as you would have killed Harald?”

“Why, Eric?” she asked.

“If I had wedded you.”

“But why?”

“I am not Ralph,” I answered humbly; and then, raising my head, I saw a wonderful light in her eyes, such as I had never thought to see in any woman’s.

And so I knew.

And, in dishonor of my friend, I drew her to me and felt the pressure of her lips on mine, and caught up her flowing hair and made a lovers’ knot of it, and told her a thousand mad things in the unbelievable joy of it.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Knotted Skein.

ALL the while that I held her in my arms, and all the while she told me that it had been I she loved, the horse went on, with ourselves seated on his back, hardly conscious of movement or time or of eternity, until some instinct bade me look up and see the old camping-ground upon the top of the hill, and eastward, not far distant, the three dwarf fir-trees.

The night was not far gone, but there would be little time to lose. I hurried the horse until we reached this starting-place, and then, dismounting, helped Editha from the saddle, and fastened the animal to a stump with the reins.

Then I gave Editha my hand, and we began to descend the cliff.

Presently we stood in a cuplike crater, with the beginning of the subterranean road in front of us. I caught Editha to me for the last time.

"I love you, dear," I said, "so greatly that I had forgotten honor and faith. What will come of it I don't know, but I'm glad now to have lost them, since it has brought me you. Afterward—if there is any afterward—"

She silenced me with her hand against my lips. I kissed it, and, fastening the end of the skein firmly about a little branch that projected from a rock at the entrance, went on, with Editha behind me.

As I went I let the skein unwind between my fingers, bearing always to the right. Five turns I counted, and then bore to the left. And when I had counted five turns more I made for the right again, walking on and on through the complete darkness, with my hand outstretched against the tunnel wall, to feel my way, and the skein running out behind me.

On the fifth turn I saw the starlight over me, and we entered the city of the Trolls.

On either side of us were the little houses, with the inmates leaning out of the windows, their heads aslant, to see who was coming, their lips pursed wisely.

The little scavengers were bustling about the streets. One, with a tiny barrow, was wheeling away a dead field-mouse; others, carrying little brooms of rushes, were sweeping. A doll's butcher-shop, in front of which hung little

joints of meat, was surrounded by busy housewives with tiny baskets. A Troll child, carrying a Troll baby no larger than a small doll, dodged into a crevice of the cliff as we appeared.

But our emergence was the occasion for extraordinary consternation. The Trolls ran screaming through the streets. In a twinkling the butcher-shop was deserted, and the butcher himself, armed with a knife no longer than a pen, stood defiantly at bay in front of it.

The housewives ran, their tiny baskets under their arms. The scavengers left their brooms and broke for safety. A Troll boy dodged between my legs. Little shutters began to bang on all the windows as we moved up the city.

Then, out of a cleft, appeared a score of graybeards, some two feet six in height, beside whom Egbert would have appeared a giant, and, joining hands in a wide ring, they began to dance solemnly about us.

Editha clung to me; it was clear that she remembered nothing of these scenes during the night, in spite of her appearance there on the former occasion.

Perhaps Haggudra had taken her by another route to the cavern in the hills, toward which the contracting and expanding circle of the old dancing men was urging us. There was fear on her face, and my own wonder was not untinged with fear.

But I kept hold of the end of the skein between my fingers.

Egbert had told me that when the skein ran out the Trolls' city was near; and, on making the last turn in the tunnel, I had wondered whether there would be enough of the cord. But, oddly enough, there still seemed more to unwind, and the cord seemed to have a certain elasticity which enabled me to keep a length about my fingers until the swaying circle stopped in front of the amphitheater.

And, though I had not seen her before, I became aware of Haggudra watching me, not a dozen paces away.

She was peering up at me from under the wisps of white hair, and gradually straightened her bent body until she stood up almost straight before me, fixing her baleful eyes on mine. Extraordinary as it may seem, I found myself looking without repugnance into the withered, wrinkled face, and wondering how many centuries ago Haggudra had been young, and how she, a white woman of Anglian or Danish blood, had come to rule the Danes,

Haggudra stretched out a skinny arm toward me.

"Yea, O Eric, son of Leontieff, you think rightly," she piped. "Once, long

ago, I was a young woman, even as she. And for my beauty I was sought in vain by many princes.

" Yea, do I not remember Ethdred, the false Saxon king, who slew my people treacherously when they had settled in his lands?"

Ethelred the Saxon! Why, the massacre of the Danes took place, if my memory served me rightly, almost a century before the battle of Hastings!

"For that I swore revenge. And I vowed upon the relics of the Rood, in Winchester, that if God would grant me nine centuries of life, never would I cease to fight against the cruel Saxon. And for this cause, when Ethelbald fled northward from the wrath of the Jarl Sweyn, I went with him, and by night slew him, and let in the Danes to Rangarok, then lately founded.

"And never since have I ceased to work against the Anglian power, nor shall, till mighty Rangarok be dissolved in ruins, and the Norns web is spun."

All the while she spoke she kept her eyes on mine. I was surprised and chilled to see that I was looking, not into the bleared eyes of an old woman, but into those of a young girl, clear and unclouded, and burning with unimaginable hate.

"Listen, O Eric, son of Leontieff!" she croaked. "I know that what is prophesied must be endured, and it is a vain task to fight against it.

"And I know that, according to the prophecies, there must be the coming of strangers, who will pull down great Rangarok and abolish our old customs, and make our name of the past.

"Yea, but art thou he? Or, if not, how hast thou dared to brave the wrath of Haggudra by coming hither on such an errand as the bird goes to the crocodile?"

"I have come here, old witch," I answered, feeling my tongue cleaving unaccountably against my teeth, "to demand that thou remove the evil spell that thou hast cast upon the Lady Editha. And if thou do not, and instantly, I will slay thee with this sword."

"Yea," she croaked, "Odin's sword, which none could pull from its scabbard!" And, as my hand closed about the hilt, my fingers clove to it, as if it were frozen. And, try hard as I might, I could neither withdraw the sword from the scabbard nor my hand from the sword.

"Not thus," Haggudra mocked, "shall he who is to come withdraw the sword of Odin!"

I could not stir. I felt as if turned to stone. The only living part of me was my right hand, whose fingers clutched the end of the elastic skein.

And Egbert's warning—what had it been?—flashed through my brain and was gone, before my mind was able to grasp it.

Editha stood dumbly at my side. About me went the swaying circle of the graybeard Trolls, linked hand in hand and dancing round me, chanting some song with shrill, birdlike voices.

All the time I was conscious of the burning eyes of the young girl in the face of old Haggudra. They were the last thing that I saw. I felt my senses reeling.

I awakened out of a swoon, to find myself seated in my chair in my apartment in New York!

I arose stiffly, not quite recalling what had happened, and staring at the familiar room. On the bed was the imprint made by Ralph, where he had thrown himself. On the floor was his suit-case.

Fool! I had been dreaming, and Rangarok, and Bjorn, and Sweyn, and the city of the Trolls were mere links in my nightmare.

On the table was my check-book. The topmost stub was that of a check for three hundred and fifty dollars, made out to Ralph Wiston. The ink was dry, but it had not yet assumed a black color and consistency.

I was overcome with unutterable sadness. I went to the window. At the end of the street I saw the outlines of the Metropolitan Museum. There was no doubt where I was!

I looked at my watch, and saw that it was three o'clock in the morning. I looked on the floor, and saw a heap of dripping clothing—mine!

My heart leaped up in sudden joy! It might have been a dream, but at least I had been in the river. And—

Something that sparkled upon the floor attracted my attention. I bent down and picked up Editha's little silver-mounted dagger.

A cry broke from my lips. It was true, then—so far it was true! And, forgetting that the caravel had sailed, I hurried into the deserted street and took a car downtown toward the wharf.

We were half-way down the Bowery before I sank back in my seat with a groan and remembered.

But I would not go back. I hurried on until I saw the wharf before me. Sailing up the East River, with lateen sails bravely set, came the long boat, and deftly glided alongside the pier.

As the archer emerged from behind the high deck and began to fasten

her, I leaped aboard. I raced along the deck toward Editha's cabin.

I saw the giant form of Knut rise from before the richly woven curtain behind which Editha slept.

He grasped his great club and raised it aloft, chanting his battle-cry.

"I am the Hero Knut, protector of my princess!" he roared. "Thus, with my club Knave-slayer, I have slain thousands worthier than thou! Draw thy sword, Angle, and engage me!"

I rushed upon him with clenched fists, and, dropping his club, the coward scurried away into the ship's hold for safety. And I drew aside the curtain.

Before me, risen from sleep, sleep in her eyes, a look of wonder on her beautiful face, stood Editha. I was overcome with longing and utter happiness. I stretched out my arms toward her.

At that moment there seemed to float back into my mind the fragment of a forgotten dream, and I seemed to hear the dwarf Egbert's voice.

"Remember, O Lord Eric!" he shrilled in tones that piped in my ears thin as the gibbering of ghosts. "Remember my warning, O Eric, son of Leontieff!"

For just an instant I hesitated. Then I stretched out my arms once more. "Editha!" I cried.

I saw the look of wonder on her face alter to fear. She drew back a pace, and I followed her.

"It is I! It is Eric!" I cried. "I love you, and I have come to you. You have come back—why have you come back if it is not for me?"

I saw her lips form Ralph's name. She turned, and, standing now with her back against the curtain, looked at me, love in her eyes, but also growing fear, growing bewilderment.

As I moved to take her in my arms she broke from me, turned again, and ran back into the little cabin. I turned on her once more; and now she faced me, her eyes fixed full upon mine.

My emotion overwhelmed me; I could not stir. A mist swam before my eyes. Through the cloudy darkness I heard a voice as of an aged woman, speaking.

"Is this the man thou lovest?" it asked. "Is this he whom thou hast chosen, and who has chosen thee, to be thine until the last day, the Judgment Day?"

And, though her lips did not move, I heard Editha answer:

"This is he. And for his life I am ready to pay the price thou askest."

"Hark!" rasped the old woman's voice. "Until this night thou hast been half Troll and half woman. Verily, if death overtake thee in thy womanhood, our magic is spent and useless, but if it overtake thee in thy Trollhood, thy soul is lost forever, to be as the fairies' souls and those of the elementals of the air.

"If thou pay this price, thy womanhood is gone, and thy soul lost irrevocably, unless before thou die Rangarok fall, and the Troll guardians of the peak come to their own judgment.

"Wilt thou pay me this price, yielding thy soul to me for life with him, that I may take thy soul for mine, and afterward thy body, and become a young and fair woman again, to bewitch men, as I bewitched them in the days of Aethelraed?"

"I pay that price," answered Editha.

But all this passed like the wind through my head, and I seemed to hear it as two voices speaking at a play, and before me stood Editha, silent and motionless, with her eyes watching mine.

Caught in that nightmare bond, I strove to embrace her, but could not stir. I saw the baleful light of her madness come into her gaze, although dawn was still distant. There was now hate in her eyes, and triumph, and something more evil than I am able to express.

Then the mist began to clear away. Chanting rang in my ears. Round and round me ran the circle of the graybeard Trolls. Over their heads rose the bare rock of the amphitheater. The eyes into which I was looking were Haggudra's.

But, whereas she had stood facing the Troll city, at the end of the tiny street, she now stood facing the rock. And in the thick chalk of the floor were the tracks of my own feet, forming a circle and more, impinging on each other as if I had turned my body on its own axis.

And in my fingers was the end of the skein, knotted!

I saw Editha standing like a statue near me. Haggudra stepped fearlessly toward me.

"Not thus," she mocked, "is Odin's sword plucked from its scabbard!"

Instantly the circle of the little Trolls was upon me. They ran between my legs and knocked me down, they seated themselves upon my body and shoulders. And, as I writhed and fought, sometimes shaking them from me,

but never managing to rise, I was aware that the whole population of the little city was streaming out toward me, carrying huge skeins in their arms.

They held me down, three to each limb, a dozen to my head and body, women and men, working busily, with the gravest demeanor, with eager eyes and pursed lips, and heads solemnly shaken, enmeshing me in bonds of spider-silk lightness, forming a network all about me.

They raised my limbs with their air of grave deliberation, pushing me this way and that. In vain I snapped the threads. They only coiled into a fluffy down that clung about me, hampering my limbs, impeding all my efforts, until I could struggle no longer.

Then, running to and fro, the busy little people wound the web about me until I was as helpless as a chrysalis in a cocoon.

At last, as if satisfied with their work, they stepped back, pursing their wise little lips, and then, deliberately setting their shoulders against my body, they began to roll me down the incline toward the main street of the Troll city.

They moved me as bees might move away some obstacle that blocks their hive. Before them ran the little scavengers, armed with their brooms, sweeping the way clean, and reminding me irresistibly, helpless though I was, of the curler who runs ahead of his stone to sweep the accumulating particles from the smooth ice surface, and improve its passage.

Onward they rolled me, now pushing me up a little incline, now steadying my descent, until we reached the front of the little butcher-shop.

There half a dozen Trolls pushed open a gate, which was about the size of a small window, but seemed the entrance to the butcher's yard. This, in turn, was about the size of a small cupboard. They heaved me upon the cobblestones that paved it, and stood back, calling to the owner.

The little butcher came running out of his shop, carrying his tiny knife. He threw up his hands in admiration at the sight of me, and stood over me whetting the blade upon the leather sole of his boot, his little leg cocked up in the air without apparent detriment to his center of gravity, and he seemed to be deliberating as to where to begin his dissection.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Black Knight.

A HEAVY rain began to fall in great splotches of water. The Trolls looked up toward the clouds with anxious faces. They seemed to be deliberating, nodding to one another and pursing up their little lips. Then a vivid flash of lightning rent the sky from end to end, followed by a crashing peal of thunder.

Instantly all was confusion. The Trolls took to their heels, butcher and all. I lay there in utter darkness, trying frantically to free myself. At last I burst through the cocoon with my right arm.

I tore the filmy stuff from me, plucking it away, rending great strips from arms and body and legs. Very softly I managed to make my way through the open gate and to crawl stealthily along the deserted street toward the side of the cliff.

Laboriously I began to make the ascent. But, drenched with rain, and bleeding from the sharp rocks, I resolved to wait till morning before attempting to proceed farther.

With morning light the Trolls would be powerless, and Editha, free to come and go, might find me. Or I might find her.

And very soon the dawn began to break. The saffron streak in the sky yielded to yellow. I could see the outlines of the trees and rocks about me.

I looked downward toward the Troll city. But I could see nothing except the bare hillside.

Suddenly I sprang to my feet with a shout of rage. There was no city nor any precipice. I had been lying upon my side out in the open, near the three dwarf fir-trees, plucking great bunches of coarse grass and weeds and casting them over my body.

The whole scene had been illusion, hypnotism, one of those grotesque tricks that the Trolls loved to play, one of those cunning and half-malevolent pranks for which they had been famous ever since modern races had come to live among them.

But—how far back did the illusion go? I knew that I had seen Haggudra,

and she had escaped me, though Bjorn's sword was still strapped upon my thigh. I knew that Editha had been with me.

Only, in the end, the Troll magic had beaten me. I had fought it with Egbert's magic—but I had knotted the skein.

I felt as helpless as a child. My whole being, my heart, my mind, all that was of me, cried for Editha. And, groaning her name, I sank down in the grass. I heard a movement near me. I looked up, and, in incredulous joy, I saw her coming toward me. She kneeled down at my side and-put her arms about my neck.

"What doth my lord desire?" she murmured.

"Editha, thee and thee only. Where have we been this night?"

"Here, my lord, for dost thou not remember how thou didst grow weary and bid me prepare the meal from the flour we carried in the saddle-bags, and sing to thee while thou didst rest? And the deep sleep that fell on thee lasted even till now. Verily, I think some spell was cast on thee and me, for I have dreamed fearful but now forgotten things under these trees, which are sacred to the god of the Trolls."

I rose and put my arms about her. In the east the sun was rising. The long rays turned the land to gold.

I looked at Editha, searching her eyes with all my soul. There she stood, looking back at me with love and worship. And the sun was rising!

"But what of our journey hither?" I asked of her.

"Truly," she answered with sweet dignity, "it was not for me to require his purpose of my lord, whom I obey."

And I knew that she remembered nothing.

Our horse was standing where I had fastened him. I mounted and placed Editha before me, and we started back along the way we had come. And, in the glorious morning, the shadows of the night seemed a dream to me, and Editha everything. I hardly even thought of Ralph, in the joy of returning with her, whole-minded and sane.

The only little cloud upon my happiness was that, when I discreetly questioned her about her cure, she seemed to have forgotten everything about the spell that had lain on her.

Well, I knew that was the way when such cases are cured; the double or other self sinks back into the normal personality and is forgotten.

And thus I turned that little grief to joy, and we rode on together until,

topping a rise, I saw a herd of horses being driven slowly by three mounted hinds, and near by a knight, in complete armor, vizored and helmeted, who was evidently in charge of them.

We saw him as he saw us. He turned his horse and rode swiftly toward us. As he drew near I saw that his armor was black, flashing back no rays from the sunlight.

He carried a black shield having on it the device of a knight trampling on a jester, looking as fresh as if it had been painted yesterday; and, in the jester's face, I discovered an uncomfortable resemblance to my own.

He galloped swiftly toward us, wheeled, and circled us, surveying Editha and myself through the bars of his vizor, which did not permit us the slightest glimpse of his face. Then, retiring, he suddenly came galloping at full speed toward me, his lance at rest, but couched.

The maneuver was so sudden that I had only time to drop Editha to the ground and draw my sword, when he was upon me. The lance-point caught the pommel of my saddle, where Editha had rested, and the momentum of the rider's charge swept the saddle from the broken girths, carrying me to the ground.

Half stunned by the shock of the fall, I waited for the death-stroke. But death in that way was not my antagonists's motive.

As Editha ran between us, her hands outstretched, pleading for me, he leaned over his horse's neck, and, raising her in his arms, despite her struggles, placed her upon the saddle of his own horse, holding her secure there in the grip of his steel-clad arms. And he shouted to the hinds.

I was on my feet, but already the three were upon me, trampling me down. Buffeted by the hoofs of the horses, I struggled ineffectively to reach my enemy, being knocked down again and again until at last I lay bleeding and all but unconscious.

Across a whirling panorama I saw a dozen knights, each holding Editha. I saw the herd come trotting up, heard the knight shout again; and then, to my horror, I was being strapped securely to three of the horses.

One leg was placed across the neck of one and fastened within the halter, the other leg upon the neck of another. The third was girthed, and to this my arms were strapped.

When all was complete, at another command from the night, the hinds began to lash the horses.

They started at a furious bound, carrying me with them, dangling limply

between, writhing and. twisting and groaning with the pain.

My limbs were almost torn from their sockets.

To be torn asunder was the fate in store for me, and awaited only the moment when the three beasts, or any two of them, should separate.

On dashed the horses, luckily keeping stride together. We passed the valley and began to ascend the next rise. Then I saw two more men, seated on horseback, watching me from the crest, and again looking toward the knight and Editha riding along the valley in the direction of Rangarok.

Suddenly one of them leaped to the ground and drew a bow from his back. I saw him fit his arrow and aim it at me. And that death seemed more merciful than the one which appeared imminent.

The horses would pass within a hundred paces of him. At such a moment a hit was a remote possibility. I closed my eyes as the great bow bent, and prayed that God would direct his aim unerringly.

I heard the twang of the bow and the hiss of the arrow through the air. And suddenly, with a jerk that caused me to scream out with pain, the horses stopped. My head went downward.

The beast that held my arms had fallen dead in its stride, shot through the heart. The fall released my arms from the girth, and now, freed from the dead weight, the other two turned and galloped back toward the herd, my legs outstretched upon their backs, my body twisted between them, the flashing hoofs passing within a few inches of my head at every movement.

Opening my eyes. I saw the archer fitting a second arrow to his bow. The distance was half as great again. A hit was clearly impossible.

Yet, before he could mount and ride in pursuit, death might overtake me, and again I prayed that he would shoot true. And again the incredible happened.

One of the two horses suddenly reared, blood gushing from its mouth and nostrils, and plunged forward, fortunately releasing my leg from the halter as it did so.

With a desperate effort I managed to twist my body sidewise until I caught the flowing mane of the one horse which now carried me.

I pulled myself into a sitting posture, grasped the halter, and somehow unfastened it. Next instant I had been flung heavily to the ground, and the whole horse and the wounded one dashed on together.

I sat up dizzily. Far in the distance, riding down the valley, I saw the knight with Editha in his arms, hardly larger than ants against the morning

sun.

I saw one of the watchers on the hill, who had dismounted with his companion, leap into the saddle and gallop furiously after them. The other came toward me.

I looked up into the face of Sweyn.

And then I fainted.

At least, I was just conscious of him bending over me, crying to me, and urging me to rise. Perhaps only a few minutes passed before I forced consciousness back upon her throne.

But what I had lost during those moments I was only to learn later.

When at length I managed to rise, I found that the second horseman had returned and was sitting on his horse beside me, leading my own.

It was hardly a surprise to me to discover that this was Bjorn.

"Editha!" I cried wildly.

"We know," said Sweyn. "Bjorn rode after them, in the hope of capturing him, but he saw that it was impossible, for, though the knight's horse carries two, it is fresh, and Bjorn and I have ridden all night. We rode in search of you."

"If Ralph were alive and here!" I groaned.

I saw the pair exchange glances. Then Bjorn made some subtle sign to Sweyn, the meaning of which I neither understood nor wished in my weakened state to understand.

"There is one chance," said Sweyn, after a moment of hesitation. "They are riding for Rangarok, for he is one of a band of Harald's knights that rode out at midnight and have been driving horses and cattle, and leaving a trail of fire and death behind them.

"But they must make a detour to return, for our forces are on the move, we having deemed it best to leave Harald no time to organize. If our surprise fails, we may still hope to wear him down by siege.

"Now, if we follow this road, we may head them off at the last pass before the city. Therefore, since we cannot leave you, and since one man will be no match for the murderous knight, try to ride with us, for the sake of the Lady Editha."

His words filled me with new strength and resolution. I drank eagerly from a flask he handed me, and placed a little bread in my saddle-bags to munch along the road, if I were able. And I managed to clamber into the

saddle.

We started at a walk, and for the few first minutes it was all I could do to keep my seat. But gradually my head began to clear, and the intensity of my purpose drove my aches away.

We put our horses to their steady gait, and began to reel off the miles that separated us from the pass before Rangarok.

After about an hour, reaching the summit of the range, and halting to breathe our horses, I saw a sight that set my heart to beating fast.

In the distance rose the peak of Rangarok, with the palace and colleges, and, clear in the bright sunlight, the spiral stairs, like threads against the masonry.

Under us was a fertile valley, extending to the last pass among the foot-hills, of which Sweyn had spoken. And all along the road that pierced it were the still-smoking ruins of burned farmhouses and cottages.

But we were not looking at these. We were looking toward the pass; and, halfway between it and the summit on which we rested, I saw the knight, with Editha on the saddle before him, riding at such a rapid pace, to judge from the little cloud of dust that rose behind him.

"There, at those ruins made by him and his band, he must turn and skirt the mountains," said Sweyn, stretching out his arm. "For now look eastward!"

I turned my eyes in the direction that he indicated, and saw a long, rolling dust-cloud rising against the hills. And, out of the cloud, I saw a serpent crawling, and the glitter of arms, and riders spread out fan-wise on each side of it.

It was the Anglian army, moving on Rangarok. And it was clear that it must reach the pass well before the knight on horseback.

"Now, if you are rested, O my lord Eric," said Sweyn, looking at me keenly, with a new deference in his manner, "we will ride at the top of our speed into the pass; and it shall go hard with him if he come within bowshot."

I answered nothing, but set spurs to my horse, and we raced like the wind down into the valley. Horsemen and army were alike concealed behind the undulating ground in front of us.

On we rode with the wind on our faces, past ruined farms, past bodies of murdered men—and women, too—unheeding, not stopping to see whether any survivors of Harald's treachery lurked in the ruins.

When our tired horses flagged we sparred them to new efforts, giving

them only the merest breathing spaces. Perhaps a full hour later we clambered up the foot-hills and saw the last pass dip down beneath us.

Sweyn shouted in joy and pointed ahead of us.

There, at the other end of the pass, rode the black-armored knight, with Editha on his saddle, lying like one in a faint. He might have been three miles away, but in the clear air he looked hardly beyond bowshot.

And hardly farther eastward came the mounted vanguard of the Anglians, and behind them, out of the dust-clouds, rolled the column of swordsmen, pikemen, archers, with their wagons and carts, their tents and their equipment, trailing far away into the distance.

The knight had balked us after all, for he had ridden straight along the road, judging the slow speed of a moving army better than we.

Yet, weary as our horses were, there was still the chance of a rescue. We urged them on again, raced into the pass, climbed up the other side, and drove them along the level plain toward the city.

Two miles, perhaps, divided us, but it was hardly four to Rangarok. Our horses hardly felt the spur. They moved with weary limbs, galvanizing them now and again into a trot, but oftener subsiding into a slow walk, with drooping heads and foam-flecked bridles, and the sweat pouring down them.

All at once Bjorn's horse collapsed, toppled, and left him lying beside it upon the grassy meadow.

"Onward!" cried Bjorn as we reined in. "I'll warn the scouts behind us."

I dug my spurs into my mount's bleeding flanks. As if feeling the force of my will, he broke into a gallop.

He passed Sweyn's steed, laboriously tugging at his bridle, and carried me on, roaring and trembling, with his ears laid back and a convulsive quiver agitating him at every stride. But we were gaining!

A mile between us!

I saw the knight look back. I saw the gates of Rangarok before us, two miles away.

The chance was still a desperate one, but hope was growing.

My horse gathered power from me, I verily believe, and the interval rapidly decreased as I measured it with straining eyes and aching heart.

Once, looking back, I saw the vanguard of the army, a hundred mounted scouts, perhaps, spread over the plain, galloping to my aid. Bjorn had warned them; but they were three miles away, and the race was between myself and

the black knight. And now the walls of Rangarok loomed up above me. The gates were closed. My heart leaped up in triumph.

Two hundred yards between us and four to the walls! I shouted madly, and I believe the wind bore my frantic cry to the knight, for he looked back and bent over his steed.

At the gates I would catch him. Unarmed as I was, I meant to tear Editha from him and strike him down. I urged my horse to a supreme effort.

I saw the gates swing open. My enemy was nearing the moat. Down came the drawbridge with the rattle and clank of chains, while I was still fifty yards away.

Once more I dug my spurs deep into my horse's flanks. Three bounds—and the fugitive was hardly yet within the gates.

But the drawbridge began to rise, and even as my horse's hooves struck upward to gain it, the edges of the beams caught him in the belly and hurled him backward, flinging me to the ground.

The massive gates behind began to close.

Within the walls, climbing the long street toward the citadel, I saw the black knight, carrying Editha.

As I rose in some wild hope born out of my anguish, my horse turned his head and looked at me with a pathetic gaze of grief, stumbled, fell, and died.

It was only a beast's life for Editha, but I bent over him and was not ashamed to feel the tears in my eyes as I did so. Raising my head hopelessly, I heard the thudding of hoofs upon the turf, and saw the vanguard of the Anglian army galloping toward me.

Suddenly, to my astonishment, the bridge swung down again, and the gates began to open. In compact array, the Anglians dashed past me, across the moat, and into Rangarok, leaving me standing there agape and wondering.

From within the city came the sound of wild cheering. I rose and crossed the drawbridge, and passed inside the walls. No one molested me, nobody knew me. But armed men were pouring out from the houses, and women waved scarfs, and, as before, flowers came fluttering down, littering the road.

At last I understood. Rangarok had opened her gates to the approaching army! It had admitted the knight, not daring to reveal the compact with Sweyn's men until it was sure; and, by the same token, not knowing me, it had closed its gates upon me.

Far up the long street I saw the black knight toiling, and high above his

head I saw the walk and bridges of the inner city. The sight galvanized me into life.

From among the horsemen who continued to stream past me a man swung his beast toward me, and halted it with a jerk that made it rear. It was Sweyn on a fresh mount.

He sprang to the ground and thrust the bridle into my hand.

"Take this horse, my lord Eric, and ride as your heart desires!" he cried. I did not waste a word in answer, but was in the saddle at a bound. I dashed among the cavalry. Somebody recognized me, cried out my name, and in a trice all knew me.

The black knight's spent steed was still some distance from the citadel, but the cheering mob impeded me, and I could only shout to them to stand aside, and dodge beneath the flowers hurled at me, and gallop as best I might through the ranks of our own men, pressed together within the narrow confines of the roadway. At last I was through them. I led them.

I pointed and shook my hand and shouted. Our horses' hoofs thundered over the stones together.

Too late! The inner gates swung open. The black knight passed them, and, even as we hurled our steeds against them, they closed by the same invisible agency, and we halted, baffled, without.

Reining in, I saw the fugitive, with Editha stretched across his saddle-bow, circle the winding ramp of the bridge. He halted at the top, looked back, and waved his hand.

Curses—good, sturdy English oaths—broke from the lips of our men. They yelled and shook their fists.

But suddenly the inner wall was lined with helmets, and from their stations behind the walls the archers poured a flight of arrows into us through the loopholes.

The hum of the missiles filled the air. Before them man and beast went down. Instantly all was confusion, and the horsemen, not deigning to retire, and yet not knowing what to do, tried to control their steeds, plunging hither and thither under the galling arrows.

To stay was madness. I galloped in front of the men and waved my hand for the withdrawal. Slowly and sullenly our baffled vanguard drew back toward the lower city, leaving a dozen fallen warriors before the walls.

Thus was the issue set. The foot-guards were already beginning to enter the walls. Our return, the sight of the empty saddles and the wounded men,

infuriated them to the point of shouting for an instant attack. But Sweyn held them in hand.

The tents were pitched in a large, open square in the heart of the town, and before evening the investment of the citadel was completed.

All through that night, while we sat in counsel, we heard the creaking wagons entering the town, carrying the siege weapons and equipment. And till daylight we talked of our plans for Harald's overthrow.

"You will accept the leadership now?" asked Sweyn of me.

I rose up in the assembly.

"I will accept!" I cried, remembering the pressure of Editha's lips on mine. For who but I now had the right to rescue her?

But even as I spoke, the thought of Ralph, dead for me, sent a chill through my heart.

CHAPTER XIX.

The Battle for Rangarok.

THE unexpected arrival of the siege train—Harald's, and built by him for operations against a distant city—made an immediate attack a possibility. The secret of construction of these massive implements had been discovered, and the Danes in charge of them overpowered.

More fortunate still was the fact that these engines were found to have just been completed, and to be ready for transportation on the heavy country carts to any destination, where they could be set up.

There were three sectional towers on wheels, which could be put together in a few hours, and moved forward at the rate of a mile a day.

Each of them was, when assembled, forty feet high, with wheels twelve feet in diameter and three feet thick. It had three floors, the top one for the archers, the middle one for the men at arms, and the lowest for the ram or catapult. From the summit a drawbridge could also be lowered.

After the multitude of councilors had spoken, Sweyn arose, turning toward me.

"Now, my lord Eric, we have heard how all counsel an immediate attack on the citadel," he said, "seeing that Harald's men are few and his reenforcements, which might entrap us within these walls, cannot arrive for a whole quarter-moon. Hear my own counsel.

"Against this we must set the fact that the walls of the citadel are strong and the bridges easily defensible. It were better to take the fortress by stratagem."

"How can that be?" they asked eagerly.

"I will reveal something known only to a few," he answered, "and learned even by me, who am King Theobald's son, and of a Danish mother, by accident. The spring which supplies the palace with water rises among the rocks behind it, bubbling up and disappearing from view again.

"But underground it merges with a wide river, the same that flows through the morasses northward, where no wall has ever been built, since the place is believed impassable.

“There is a secret road which can be followed by a party of our men, leading into the heart of the citadel, along the river course, so that only a hundred paces separate the end of it from the palace spring.

“Let us, then, assault the walls in force, but as a feint, to be developed into a real attack if it promises success; but meanwhile let three hundred men follow the secret path into the keep. What say you, my lord?” he continued, turning to me.

“An excellent plan,” I answered.

“Good!” said Sweyn promptly. “Then, since it meets your favor, you yourself shall lead the surprise.”

“And you?” I asked.

“It is meet that I should head the attack upon the wails, to hearten our people.”

Animated discussion broke out at this. Myself, I cared little what part was assigned to me, so long as I could avenge Ralph and save Editha from her dreadful fate.

At length Sweyn’s plans were agreed upon, and it was settled that Bjorn and I should take the party of three hundred, to surprise Harald in his palace and, after overcoming him, open the gates to the besiegers.

Furthermore, it was decided that the attack should begin late on the following afternoon, so that it would be at its height about the time when we were starting on our journey along the stream.

“But who, save you, knows the secret passage?” I asked.

Sweyn called from his palace, and his attendant entered—the man Wolf, whom I had seen on the preceding evening.

Looking at him. I thought his face was vaguely familiar, and at last I identified him in my mind as one of the Danes who had drunk and sung with Ralph in the Stockade upon the night of our arrival in the country.

The recognition was very pleasing to me, for he must have known of Ralph’s fate—at least, in so far as any of us could.

“Wolf, the son of Ethelred, knows of the secret way, for his father hewed away the debris that had choked the spring after the upflaming of Loki’s fire, in the year of the massacre,” he said. “And he will guide us, for he knows where his interest lies.”

Afterward I spoke to Wolf of our former meeting, and was surprised at the look of confusion on his face. I did not press him when he denied himself,

feeling sure that some harmless motive lay behind his action. However, I mentioned the matter to Sweyn.

"Aye," he answered indifferently, "he is half Danish and half Anglian, like many of us. And they say we always turn from one allegiance to another, as I have turned from mine."

"But you have chosen rightly, Sweyn," I answered.

On the next day, at dawn, preparations for the assault were being busily carried forward, the engines having been put together by skillful workmen during the night.

There was a space of more than an arrow's flight between the topmost houses of Rangarok and the citadel. Hither we sent our men, and marshaled them—some nine thousand—against perhaps three thousand of Harald's.

By noon the keep had been completely invested for about three-fourths of its circumference, to the point on either side where the precipice of the peak sloped sheer to the morasses, buttressed on each flank by a great tower.

At intervals along our line archers were stationed, to run forward and shoot if any concentration of the enemy appeared upon the bridges. Behind them were marshaled the men-at-arms, carrying pikes; there were also five companies of swordsmen, completely armored, and facing each of three towers that commanded the approach to each of the three great spiral bridges.

Then, with a creaking, grumbling sound, the three siege towers, which had been moved forward during the night, were pushed toward the walls, each drawn by three dozen men, concealed beneath the protecting sides.

Instantly the walls of the citadel became alive with men, a great shout of laughter went up, and a flight of arrows was discharged at the ponderous, slow-moving engines.

They stuck and quivered in the wooden walls, but the towers moved onward slowly, and, seeing that their attempts were fruitless, the archers saved their missiles and crowded the platform beneath the parapet, over which their bronze helmets appeared. They were evidently studying our maneuvers.

Hours passed at this diversion, for the towers moved only by inches, creaking and rocking on their great wheels, and seeming as if about to overturn, but always moving inexorably toward the walls, until at last they came to a halt, not more than a dozen yards distant.

Still no arrows came from the parapet. The tower opposite the central span stood overtopping the walls, but not the tower of stone, which faced it

about at an equal height. Then, with a slow, clanking motion, two drawbridges began to descend, revealing the serried ranks of the archers upon the upper platform, and on the lower a phalanx of men-at-arms, with sword in hand and shield on arm.

Down went the drawbridges, till the lower one rapped on the stone coping of the walls, while the upper, gliding askew touched the summit of the stone tower opposite. And instantly the parapets of Rangarok became alive.

Out of the stone tower leaped a dozen Danes, yelling and brandishing great battle-axes, their round shields held before them. But as they leaped for the drawbridge the archers poured a flight of arrows into them.

At so short a range every missile struck home. Down went the Danes, sheer into the five-hundred-foot fall between the walls and the peak, and from the lower drawbridge the men-at-arms streamed forth and gained the walls.

Instantly the reserve bodies of our pike-men ran streaming forward to support them. For a few minutes the Anglians beat back the defenders and seemed to have gained the parapet.

Then, with a mighty shout, a huge man leaped from the tower. He wielded a great, two-handed sword, and at his appearance a mighty roar came from a thousand throats within.

It was King Harald.

Wielding his great weapon, he flung himself forward at the head of his rallying supporters. Anglian and Dane were intermingled, and the clashing sound of sword and ax was continuous as the chattering of a knife-grinder's wheel.

But above this sound came a deeper, louder one, like a succession of subterranean explosions. A great stone seemed to shake itself out of the walls and rolled down, splintering into fifty fragments. It was the work of the battering-ram in the central tower, wielded by twelve of our strongest men at work on the defenses.

Simultaneously the two other towers had reached the walls and disgorged their men. Smoke began to drift along the parapet. The Danes, within the tower, were hurling bunches of flaming tow against the wooden structures.

Sweyn was here, there, and everywhere, disregarding the arrows that came fast from the walls, shouting his orders, while his men advanced methodically in columns and lines to support the assailants.

For a moment the mock attack seemed about to meet with unanticipated success.

"Now go, and God be with you!" he cried to me as, on horseback, I waited with Bjorn at a vantage-point behind the lines.

The sun had set, and darkness was coming on apace, though it was only the middle of the afternoon. We galloped at full speed back into the town, skirting the houses and descending toward the head of the marshes, where Wolf, with our chosen three hundred, awaited us.

But I looked back before the walls faded from sight, and saw a great pillar of flame leap upward from one of the towers, fired by the tow. More I could not see, but through the smoke I fancied I could discern that our men were still pouring out of the towers and holding their own against King Harald's broadsword. Above the uproar could be heard the punching thud of the rams.

Then Bjorn and I were in the valley, and our men were drawn up to welcome us. Bjorn turned to me.

"My lord," he said, "this is a perilous business, and unless Sweyn's attack hold, it must meet defeat. For our only hope is that Harald will have drawn all his reserves of righting men to meet the attack. Therefore let us hasten, seeing that many lives depend upon it."

"Be it so," I answered.

Wolf took the lead, and we followed him in a long, winding column of twos. At first we sank more than ankle-deep in the marshy ground, and Wolf hurried to and fro, plunging a long, stick here and there into the swamps, while the darkness increased, and we chafed at the waiting.

Sweyn's assault, if it failed, must be pressed home until we had reached our destination; and each minute's delay might mean a life.

A dreadful price to pay! At last, when our impatience had reached fever-heat, Wolf shouted and pointed to a tiny trail, hardly discernible, among the rushes. So we began our march.

It was firm footing, but no wider than two men might travel abreast. Bjorn and I were at the head of the column, with Wolf ahead of us, walking now as if he were sure of his way.

Presently the peak of Rangarok again loomed up above us. All around us were the mountains; the city had sunk out of sight behind a crest, and it was eery in that solitude, broken only by the cries of the wild fowl as they fled from this unaccustomed molestation of their secret haunts. There was, however, a dull undercurrent of sound from Rangarok, deflected by the hills until it seemed to pervade the air everywhere; and once I thought I caught

against a cloud a gleam of the reflected light from the burning tower.

We went on, now following the path beside the river, along which Sweyn and Editha and I had come that night.

I recognized the scene. Above us was the towering peak, here a sheer precipice, and somewhere in the footing of those rocks was the earth-hole through which we had fled.

Bjorn hurried ahead and halted Wolf, and beckoned to me to come.

"Now show us our destination," he said.

Wolf stretched out his hand toward an outjutting pile of rocks that barred our approach, three hundred yards ahead of us.

"Behind that," he said, "is the streamlet that flows into the river. It is the same that rises in the rocks behind the palace and flows underground.

"From that rock to the spring is barely a hundred steps up-hill, and that is the only point at which the cliff can be scaled. Two hundred steps more, and you reach the foundations of the palace itself.

"A hundred more, and you are within the citadel. And, since the ground is firmer here, it would be well to draw up your men in lines, twelve abreast, which is the breadth between marsh and marsh."

I called softly to the captain of the leading company, which was straggling up behind me, and bade him transmit the order. I heard it whispered from rank to rank, and presently our three hundred had adjusted themselves to the new formation. Meanwhile, Bjorn was testing the extension of the firm ground, moving step by step toward the river until he stood on its bank, fifty yards away. Then he came back.

"I find no swamp here, Wolf," he said.

Wolf shook his head.

"Nay, my lord, I did not say that there were swamps everywhere," he answered. You may stand on firm ground one moment, and, at the next step, plunge waist-deep into a bog.

"This is due to the subterranean springs. However, within a space in which twelve men can stand abreast the ground is firm."

I turned to the leading captain again. "Bid your men advance softly," I ordered. "Beyond that rock we ascend the cliff. Let them neither speak nor let their swords clatter. At the summit we win Rangarok."

I heard a buzz of subdued excitement behind me, in spite of my order. Then we went on, Wolf advancing rapidly in front of us till he was almost

lost to view. I whispered as loudly as I dared, but he did not hear me. So I went on ahead of Bjorn to slow his speed.

I saw him round the rock, and followed him. And then I stood still, my tongue cleaving against my teeth.

For a squadron of a hundred knights, heavily armed and carrying lances at rest, awaited us. And at their head, with vizor down, was the black knight.

I saw the mocking smile upon Wolf's face, and drew my sword to cut him down. But he was dodging in and out among the hoofs of the horses, and as I stopped my pursuit and tried to shout a warning I saw BJorn appear.

Our cries rang out together. But already the head of the column was appearing round the rock. Six men sprang from the saddle and flung themselves upon us.

I had no time to get purchase for my blew, which glanced harmlessly off the armor of my nearest assailant. I looked up and saw that it was the black knight, his vizor still over his face.

I heard him laugh, and the sword was struck from my hand, while a blow from the flat of his laid me prostrate in the mire.

Bjorn, fighting valiantly, had been overpowered as well. And, lances in rest, the squadron charged in a resistless mass upon our men.

Roars from the Danes, an answering cry that quavered and broke, and the horsemen were harrying our surprised and helpless footmen as the wolf harries a sheep-flock.

Backward they drove them, till they had edged them into the swamps beside the river, a mob now, each seeking safety and not finding it.

They rode them down, they forced them deeper into the morasses, into the ice-cold stream. I closed my eyes, waiting for the instantaneous death-stroke.

But through my closed eyelids I seemed to see the last helpless stand of those whom I had led to death, I heard the bubbling cries of the drowning, the screams of those stricken to death; and then, once more, the roaring cheers of the Danes upon the walls of the citadel, and fewer counter-cries from Sweyn's brave followers.

There was nothing that I desired better than death at that moment. Even Editha had become but a misty shadow.

But no blow fell, and when I looked up I saw the black knight regarding me. He had put up his vizor, and the face was Ralph Wiston's.

CHAPTER XX.

The Pact of Death.

I HAVE written of him hitherto as my friend; I have justified him, and I do so still. For I have no doubt that the hardships and the perils had turned his brain, so that even now I can call him my friend, and think of him as I had known him till that moment.

Yet my heart went sick with horror, and the hate in his eyes and the sneer on his lips made the episode seem less real than any of our fantastic adventuring since we passed through the many evolutions of the ice-pack.

"So the horses didn't tear you, Eric!" he mocked.

It was impossible to answer him; I think he expected no answer, for at a sign from him two of his men caught me roughly about the body, and two others seized Bjorn, and they began to drag us up the hill, then into a rock tunnel—one of many that I perceived in the friable cliff.

After a short journey through pitch-darkness we emerged into a stone cell, lit by great candles that flickered on the wall and cast wavering shadows on the flagged floor.

In one corner was a great heap of rushes, which evidently had served as the bed for some unhappy prisoner before us. Above it was a tiny barred window, but the light that filtered in was so faint and dim that nothing could be seen without.

The two Danes who held me now released me, and Bjorn's captors set him free also, pointing, not unkindly, toward the rushes.

We flung ourselves down in utter exhaustion. The Danes, reaching up their great hands, extinguished the candles one by one and went out, locking the door with a ponderous, foot-long key. So we were left alone.

For hours we did not speak. My heart was too full, and the screams of our dying men still rang in my ears. I fell into a sort of swooning trance at last, from which I was aroused by the touch of Bjorn's hand on my shoulder.

"You were not to blame, Eric," he said in the old, friendly fashion, as if misfortune had once more made us equals.

"I wish to Heaven that I had never started upon this journey!" I burst out

impulsively.

"It was not of your will. Eric," he answered, "but the will of the Norns. They rule us, the wise old women who have woven the human web from all eternity. None can gainsay them. We are but puppets in their hands. Yes, Christian though I am, I know that this thing is true. And I know also that all shall be well with us."

"All well!" I echoed. "Can you restore the dead or give me back the lost loyalty of a friend?"

"Indeed. Eric, did I not warn you from the first against him?" he asked reproachfully. "Was it not clear to every one that he but used you for his own ends, cursing your whim to come here, as he considered it, and thinking only how he could turn everything to his advantage?"

Such was the force of habit that even then some instinct bade me protest against his words. But he went on with a logic that was irrefutable.

"Thus he seemed to me aboard the ship," he said. "Nay, and I may say this much now; he proposed to me that we take command and sail for Spitzbergen, where freight brings fabulous prices in the late summer.

"And afterward, watching him, I saw how your words had played upon him, so that he planned to oust you and take to himself all benefits that might come, strutting like a peacock before the tent. And did he not falsely plot with the Lady Editha against you?"

I could not answer him.

"There is this, more," said Bjorn deliberately. "On the night of the festival, after the tourney, when his overthrow and your conquest of Harald had made him sick with envy, he plotted with the Danes. Yea, and he was among the band that attacked our men in the banquet-hall, urging them on against you, whom he did not dare assail.

"Furthermore, through the spy, Wolf, he learned of your journey to the Trolls' city, for Wolf must have overheard you when you told me of your plans. Fortunate indeed was the impulse which brought Sweyn and me to find you."

"And that was the cause of your indifference when I spoke of Ralph as dead?" I asked.

He patted my arm in his fraternal way.

"That was the cause," he said. "How could we have told you that he was living, and a traitor, when you would not have believed us?"

"I've been blind, Bjorn," I said. "And I want to atone for it. Would that

my death could have saved the life of one of those who died!"

"That, too, was of the Norns." he answered. "Be comforted, for the end is not yet; and, though you and I must part, both of us shall attain that which we most desire."

Poor comfort to me then! The strangeness of his words meant nothing to me at the time. I relapsed into silence, and we lay there side by side until a gleam of dawn began to straggle through the little window. Presently there came a click of the lock, and I started up to see Knut, the fool, enter alone, carrying milk and bread.

He set it down beside us, and urged us to eat, chattering and licking his lips meanwhile. I managed to make some sort of a meal, but the half-witted prison-keeper, as he evidently was, was the last man that I could have borne.

When we had finished eating he took the empty bowls, and suddenly his face assumed an expression of intense seriousness.

"What think you of me, Lord Eric?" he asked.

"God be with thee, Knut!" I answered in the old Danish fashion, as one says in such cases.

"Yet, my lord, for all your wisdom, you are wrong," he replied. "Twenty years agone, at the time of the great massacre, they took my father and my brothers and slew them, and placed their heads on poles above the walls, with those of many others. But I was of tenderer years than my five brothers, and when they looked at me they hesitated. Thereupon, my brain never having been overstrong, and seeing death before me, it came to me to feign to be a fool such as God protects.

"So, chattering before them, I won their hearts; and ever since, fearing death beyond all things, I have continued to act in this manner until it has become my nature.

"Rarely indeed do I remember the wisdom that I learned from my father. Yet it is better to be a fool and live and tell the truth, than a wise man and lie and yet meet death from the sword."

He turned such a scrutinizing glance upon me that I saw he was at least deeper than he pretended.

"Listen, my lords," he went on, speaking now more earnestly again. "Through all my folly one thing has ever been with me—to protect my princess, for whose sake I endured the winds and the heaving waters.

"Hitherto, when she was of two natures, and diverse ones, I wavered, not knowing which to serve. But since the Jarl Ralph brought her hither against

her will she has had but the one. And whereas once she loved him by day and hated him by night, now she hates him always.

"So much have I learned by listening while they thought me but a fool. When he arrived with her, King Harald made him a jarl, and promised him half a province, gold, and his choice of any bride in Rangarok.

"But he loves the Lady Editha, and will abandon everything for her—yea, my lords, for her he plans treachery against King Harald.

"Last night she threatened to kill herself with the dagger that I had given her at her bidding, if he approached her. And, in fear of this and of Harald, he went away. But later he came back, joyful, and told her that by morning you, my Lord Eric, would be in his power.

"And he proposed this: either she should become his bride when he has overthrown Harald, and you should be left alive and given a free passage through the ice fairway; or you shall be hurled to death from the highest point in Rangarok.

"She wept when he said that, but she never hesitated, my lord. She pledged herself to wed him, if he would swear by the relic of the Rood, which lies beneath the altar in the chapel, that he would keep his word. So it goes, my Lord Eric."

"And Harald knows that we are captives here?"

"Truly, my lord. And having beaten back the Anglians, who are but indifferent fighters unless their laws are threatened or their beer taken away, he drinks deep in the palace above and swears revenge upon his enemies."

"And why have you told us this, Knut?" asked Bjorn.

"This," answered the fool, "is my message to my lord here from the Lady Editha. And furthermore, my lord, she bids me say that whether Ralph be her husband, or whether another fate befall her, her thoughts will ever be of you."

The key sounded in the lock again, and instantly the mask of folly came back over the shrewd fool's face. He leered and chattered at us, watching Ralph Wiston, as he entered, out of the corner of his eye.

Ralph had put off his armor, and now wore a silken gown embroidered with leopards; on one arm was a gold bracelet, the insignia of his new rank.

He was accompanied by two armed guards, with Danish swords, and strode forward peremptorily into the cell.

"Stand up! I have something to say to you!" he began with an affectation of command that hardly concealed his evident uneasiness.

"Speak with Bjorn!" I retorted. "He, at least, was never your friend."

He glared at me, fury and shame seeming to struggle in him.

"So you were my friend?" he asked. "You thought that you had bought my friendship with your miserable money? I tell you I hated you after you forced your first five dollars upon me! And every loan only made me hate you the more. And you held this as a club over me, to bring me here, to use me as a tool in your fantastic schemes and become ruler here. Would common flesh and blood stand for that, Eric Silverstein?"

"It was you—" I began, and then broke off and shrugged my shoulders. After all, what was the use?

"And, to be chosen in place of me, you used this madman here to trick and humble me at the tournament," he went on. "Damn you, with your rotten hundred-dollar checks, you Shylock!"

It was a revelation to me how the memory of those obligations seemed to have rankled.

"And you were playing me false with Editha," he went on, spitting his words almost into my face. "I was to marry her! I was the butt of your schemes, eh? When I learned that she had saved you from Harald's vengeance on the night of the banquet, at which I had planned your murder —"

"You damned traitor!" I cried, thinking of how I had mourned for him.

He struck me across the face, and stood glaring at me in unutterable hate, as if he could hardly keep from slaying me there and then. The guards stared in amazement at the scene, straining their ears to understand the, to them, incomprehensible and yet vaguely familiar language.

"Then," he cried, "I resolved to inflict on you a punishment that should free me from the memories of your cursed money and your dirty schemes! I learned where you had gone. The plan to have you torn by the horses was the result of a moment's inspiration; and it failed.

"I don't know why you should have been lucky enough to get away, but I tell you this, Eric Silverstein: you may thank your fortunate stars that there is one passion in the human breast stronger than hatred. It is love.

"You got away, and you can go free after all. I'm going to stoop to bargain with you. Editha pleaded for your lives. I've nothing against this hulking clown."

I swallowed hard under his insults and the blow, but made no attempt to reply. In fact, it was then that I first began to realize that Ralph Wiston was

mad. And pity began to supplant anger in me.

"You shall leave Rangarok," he resumed in a more moderate manner. "But Heaven pity you if you cross my path again! I'm going to develop this country, and go back to America and form a company to exploit it. You'll be there. Don't let me hear of you, or—"

"Well," he went on, "Editha has agreed to marry me as soon as I have disposed of the old drunkard. And you are to be my wedding gift to her.

"That's what I've come for—to ask whether you'll swear to accept my terms, leave Rangarok and this country, and try no tricks."

"If that is your compact," I answered, "I must see Editha and learn it from her own lips."

"You shall see her. That's part of the agreement. You shall see her now," he answered, and made a sign to one of the guards.

The door opened, and in the faint morning light I saw Editha, dressed in white, standing before me.

She raised her head and looked at Ralph with an effort.

"I must speak to Eric alone," she said quietly.

He scowled and hesitated, bit his lip, and then went out with the swordsmen. Bjorn made as if to follow them, but she made him a gesture to remain.

So he went to the little window and, turning his back, stood looking up at the day.

I never thought of Bjorn. I clasped her in my arms.

"What is this bargain. Editha?" I cried, "You have bartered yourself for me—for my worthless life?"

"Your life is dearer to me than my own happiness," she answered with a sob, setting her face fall against my shoulder. "It was an evil day we met. An evil day for you, Eric, my love."

"The one day of my life," I answered. "The beginning of my life, Editha. If I go and leave you to him, the shame of it will never pass from me. But for your sake I would not hesitate. But if I refuse the bargain, what will happen to you?"

"If you reject it, Eric, he will still take me, willing or unwilling. It is a gift, not a bargain. I have no doubt that he will overcome Harald, and indeed I know not which of them I fear the more, though I hate Ralph more.

"Already a plot is afoot to unite Danes and Anglians under one ruler.

Harald's day is done.

"Many have long been dissatisfied with his rule, and he brought back little plunder from his expedition to the outer isles, and many were killed.

"Whether Ralph win or Harald win, therefore, matters but little. One thing is sure, and that is that, try as he may, Sweyn can never conquer Rangarok. Already, they say, his beaten army is deserting him.

"So you must go, knowing that my love will follow you across the ice and over the black water, to that far-off home of yours in the strange Anglian land ruled by the witan."

"Then, since your fate must be the same, whether I go or stay, I stay, Editha," I answered. "My life is nothing to me now, except for you, for the memory of those who died yesterday, betrayed to him, makes death seem the one choice that I would make if I lost you."

She clasped my hands in hers and looked at me with intense solemnity.

"Be it death, then," she answered. "For you and me, Eric, my lord."

Somehow at that moment the simple compact seemed to us both the most natural thing in the world. We had hardly come to it when Ralph, whom I had heard fuming impatiently without, entered with the two guards.

"Well, you've come to an understanding, eh?" he sneered.

Editha went up to him and stood confronting him, neither timid nor scornful, still under the influence of our compact, I think, which seemed to us a light out of the darkness.

"Yes, we have reached an understanding," she replied. "And we refuse—I to become your wife; Eric to go. Deal with us as pleaseth you."

He staggered back, glaring from one of us to the other. Then, leaping forward, he struck me a second blow that swept me from my feet.

I fell, my head striking the stone wall of the cell. That was all I remembered.

CHAPTER XXI.

Harald Regains His Throne.

AFTER that I was faintly conscious of a succession of nights and days within a dungeon. I knew that Bjorn tended me; I felt the food between my lips; but I was only partly conscious for what seemed an immeasurable time.

Really it was something like two weeks that my illness lasted. It was less the concussion of the fall than a fever brought about by the culmination of my experiences and hardships.

Then came the morning when I awakened, conscious once more, but weak as a child, to find Bjorn on his knees beside me, tugging at my arm.

"Harken, Eric!" he began. "You can hear and understand me now, for the crisis of the fever is past, and I must acquaint you with what is happening. It is two weeks since your illness began."

My memories of the past began to surge along the channels of my brain. I groaned and turned my head away. Bjorn waited patiently until I was ready to listen to him.

"Sweyn has attacked Rangarok again," he said. "This I have learned from Knut. Again his forces have been beaten back from the walls; nevertheless, his engines have made a breach, and if division come among the Danes he may profit by it.

"This day King Harald is formally wedded to the Princess Editha, and we, as captives, are to be present at the ceremony. I go in chains, in a few minutes, but at Editha's plea, and because of your sickness, you are to be spared that insult.

"Ralph, the traitor, has been plotting meanwhile, and something is afoot, some plot by which he hopes to overthrow Harald this noon. There will be fighting, and it is of this that I was thinking when I spoke of Sweyn; for news of this has been conveyed to him through the medium of a trusted messenger —Knut, the fool.

"In my visions I have ever seen an auspicious ending to our troubles. Yet I do not rely on these, knowing how the wishes of the dreamer creep into and color them. But in the confusion there may be a chance for your safety and

Editha's. That is what you must understand. Watch, therefore, and remember that there are many Anglians among the nobles who will side with you if events be propitious."

I smiled and clasped his hand.

"I thank you a thousand times, my friend," I answered him. "But how can I play any part in these affairs, who am hardly able to move my hand?"

For answer he took from his coat a tiny vial.

"This, Eric, is the gift of the Lady Editha," he answered, "conveyed to me through Knut, our jailer. She has heard day by day the reports of your condition, and has awaited the passing of the crisis.

"Now that has come, and this vial contains a secret remedy, which restores strength to the drinker—not for a time, as drugs do, but in full measure and permanently. Drink it, Eric, and hastily, before the jailers come!"

He held it out to me. It was composed of blackish glass, crusted with calcareous deposits; and, knowing that there was no glass in Rangarok, I knew that it must be of immeasurable antiquity.

It was hermetically fused, the tapering neck being obviously designed to be pinched off with the fingers. I broke it, and a faint odor of something like bitter almonds came to my nostrils.

I hesitated for a moment, and then, seeing Bjorn's anxiety, tilted the vial against my lips and swallowed the spoonful or so of the contents.

It was insipid, sweetish, and for a minute or two I felt no results from it.

Then a warm glow began to pervade my limbs. I felt my strength returning. I raised my arms and was astonished to find how readily they responded to my will. I got up doubtfully, stood on my feet, and found myself still comparatively weak, but not as a man who had passed through a critical illness.

"Thank God!" said Bjorn fervently. "It is a drug brought to this land, by Editha's ancestors, Knut told me, and acquired by them from the Moslem. Nothing but our desperate situation would have induced me to accept Knut's word as to its potency. And now, Eric, I hear the jailers coming. They are to take me first, to fit my chains in the armory. It may be we shall not meet again until our destiny is fulfilled. God be with you, my friend and brother!"

There were tears in his eyes, and this was almost the first sign of emotion that I had ever seen in Bjorn. It was then for the first time that I realized the depths of his controlled nature. And afterward, I found myself wondering

what strength of will, what secret aim, and what tenacity had brought him to Rangarok. I was to know later.

The cell door opened just as at Bjorn's urging, I had thrown myself down on the rushes, feigning my illness. Two jailers entered and took Bjorn away.

I was alone for the first time since our capture.

When the jailers were gone I paced the cell, feeling my strength momentarily returning. I was consumed with a fever of anxiety and dread for Bjorn and Editha; and my mind, which had not reacted to the drug with the speed of my physical frame, was in a turmoil of doubt and surmises.

What was Ralph planning, and what did it portend for the woman I loved? It was perhaps an hour after Bjorn's departure that the guards came for me. I had the wisdom to assume weakness, and moved slowly between them out of the cell, and up a flight of stone stairs—another, and through a distant door I saw Rangarok, ablaze with sunlight.

From the banquet-hall I heard the sound of many voices. I was led in, to find it packed to suffocation with Danes and Anglians.

It was now the council hall; for the long tables had been removed, and, at the end near that which I entered, Harald sat on a carved throne embossed with silver, under a canopy of silk. A second throne, on his right hand, was empty.

The thrones were placed on a raised dais, and round them stood a dozen armored swordsmen, Harold's body-guard. About him were clustered the Danish and Anglian nobles, among whom I perceived Ralph, dressed in his jarl's attire, and lolling very near to Harald.

Farther away I saw Bjorn, standing with his wrists linked by huge fetters of iron. His legs were similarly bound, and a great wave of disgust and shame came over me.

All about the dais, cramming the hall, was gathered the multitude, leaving a narrow lane in their center, guarded by pike-men. At the far end, through the open door, I saw a greater crowd, extending across the fields as far as the base of Odin's temple.

I had expected my entrance to make some stir, but, except for a ripple of passing interest among the mob, and a few taunting remarks from those about me, none noticed me as I was placed on the side of the hall opposite Bjorn. I tried to catch his eyes, but he did not look at me.

Nor did Ralph, who moved uneasily from foot to foot, his head bent down, as if he was studying and pondering; his lips were compressed, but

once he raised his head and exchanged glances with some of the nobles near him.

Suddenly there came a hoarse murmur from without; it swelled into a distant cheer, growing louder and deeper until it was taken up within the hall itself. All eyes were turned toward the door; and up the entrance, preceded by a score of swordsmen and attended by a dozen maids in white, came Editha.

She, too, was dressed in white, as when I had seen her last, but there was a circlet of gold upon her head and gold bracelets on her wrists. She moved slowly up toward the dais, while the crowds that filled the place pressed hard against the guards, shouting and cheering her, in tones so like those of our own populace that again a sense of the unreality of it all came over me with bewildering force.

Up the hall she moved, her eyes looking from right to left; and now she had seen me, and, though I could detect no movement of her lips, I could read the message in her eyes, and knew that our compact remained unbroken.

Then she had looked at Ralph, and, whatever had passed between them after that blow he dealt me, he could not face her now. He shifted still more uncomfortably, glancing over her and about her as she hesitated for an instant.

But the blazing scorn upon her face was patent to every one. And the cheering stopped, as a sense of some imminent catastrophe seemed to take hold of the audience, and even Harald on his throne leaned forward and looked at Ralph curiously and then at the girl.

The halt was hardly more than a moment's intermission. Editha advanced, curtsied to Harald and stood gravely before him, while her maidens grouped themselves behind her at the foot of the dais.

And I wondered whether our compact included Harald, and whether Editha would take her place beside him. But she remained where she was standing, and now I perceived that this of itself signified nothing, but was a part of the ceremony.

All was intently silent now, save a low muttering from one corner. Looking across the heads of the people, I saw old Theobald, the mock king, telling his beads.

Then from among the retinue of the king old Asgeld stepped forward, in his hands a heavy iron crown. He stood before Harald and placed it on his head.

"Hail, Harald, King of the Danes and Anglians, mighty lord of great

Rangarok!" he chanted. "Thus I crown thee again, according to our Danish custom, with the iron crown made from the steel of conquered foemen. As none could face thee in fair battle, so none can wrest thy crown away, till flesh and blood break steel asunder."

He stood back, and suddenly Harald turned toward me and cried in bitter mockery:

"Hail, Eric the Stranger! Hail, my lord and conqueror of the lists, who by thy devilish arts hast overthrown me!"

And he stood up, the iron crown awry on his head, a great bulk of a man, glaring at me out of his cold, blue eyes.

"Thinkest that thou, with thy might, unaided by witchcraft, canst overcome King Harald?" he roared.

I looked back steadily at him.

"What I have done once I am willing to try again, Harald, usurper!" I answered.

His glare was like a tiger's. And in truth it was a desperate thing to have said. I saw the bulging eyes of the nobles round him. I saw the swordsmen lay their hands to their hilts, as if waiting to cut me down when Harald should speak.

The Danish king's face was red with fury. Harald stared at me; and gradually I saw a look of surprise come upon his lace and soften it.

Then he sat down in his throne and began to roar and bellow with laughter.

"Stand back, my nobles!" he shouted. " Stand back and make way for this valiant man! Come hither, Eric! Come, let me have words with the only man who has ever beaten Harald, whether by strength or trick. Had it been that comrade of yours, I should have marveled less."

The nobles round him moved slowly and unwillingly away. As one or two lingered the king seemed to become infuriated. Leaping from his throne, he seized an effeminate youth who was within arm's reach of him, and, lifting him on high, hurled him into the midst of the guards, where he lay stunned.

There was a hurried clearing of the dais. Only Editha and her maidens remained, and even they were out of hearing of a low conversation.

I stood before the king, looking steadily at him. He continued to scan my face, and the look in his eyes was almost wistful, as if he were dwelling upon long-forgotten things.

"Thinkest thyself to be the peer of Harald?" he asked me gravely.

"In strength?" I asked. "In skill?"

"In those things—yea, and in cunning and love and statecraft and leadership? Thinkest that thou couldst rule this turbulent realm?"

"In none of these am I your equal, Harald, Danish king," I answered. "Yet in all these am I willing to match myself against you."

"Eric," he said, after a pause, now speaking in a voice so low that even Editha could not have heard, "thou art the boldest and yet the timidest man whom I have ever known. Are there others like thee in thine own country?"

"Many," I answered, "better than myself, O king."

"By Odin," he said, "I cannot understand thee! For, among us Danes, when a man hath done great deeds he vaunts of them and boasts, both out of natural desire and to affright others.

"But thou hast the skill of a warrior and the heart of one, and yet thinkest thyself as nothing. Methinks it would be a pity that thou, who hast dared cross the black water and found the fairway of the ice, shouldst die at Asgeld's hands."

This was the first inkling that I had of the fate that had been allotted to me.

"Where was thy birthplace?" Harald asked.

He nodded when I told him; but I did not think that he knew where America was, or of any part of the world outside his own outer island, from which, I imagined, he had sailed to become the lord of Rangarok.

He bent toward me and spoke in a still lower voice.

"My heart hath gone out toward thee, O Eric," he said, "and why this is I know not, unless—"

Whatever he was going to say, he checked himself.

"Usually," he went on, "I like a man who hath a tongue as well as an arm; and truly, when a man comes near to beating me, I hate him with an exceeding hate. Thou hast broken my pride, Eric, and yet I love thee. And so I would fain save thee from that which awaits thee."

I heard the low buzz of astonishment in the hall. I could see the nobles clustering together about Ralph, whispering.

"Perhaps." he said, "it is because thou art a true man, and hast been betrayed by a traitor, such as I hate. And, if I show them kindness, it is not for long. Hark, now! It is in my mind to make thee my faithful counselor. And if

no son is born to me and the Lady Editha, whom I espouse, I would even choose thee to be my successor, to give the knowledge of the Byzantines unto my people, and teach them the cunning of the ships that move, as we are told, against wind and tide, vomiting black smoke.

"And mark me, O Eric, what Harald promises, that he fulfils!

"For many years I have lived here in Rangarok, and had my fill of battle and love and statecraft and danger, both by war and ice, such as delight any heart.

"And yet I know in my heart that there are other things than these. In a few years more I shall be old, and no longer able to go forth to war and taste the joy of killing. What sayest thou?"

What could I say, except that Editha was paramount in my heart? And to have said this would have provoked a wrath that would have ruined that least chance of freedom with her in which I still dared dwell in my hopes.

But I felt a dawning admiration for the fierce Danish king. He was much of a man, this old warrior of Rangarok.

Simultaneously there came to me the thought that, whatever happened, it would be better that Harald should rule than Ralph. I went closer to Harald.

"O king," I said, "before I answer I would fain speak a word. Having spoken to me of statecraft, why do you trust a traitor who plots against you?"

I saw the flash in his eye. He understood me, and he smiled so craftily that the sudden change from frankness, the very complexity of the man, endeared him to me the more.

"But what sayest thou?" he asked again.

"I cannot," I answered.

"Is death so sweet, then, or is my rule so bitter?"

"It may be," I returned, "that I have other plans and hopes."

My answer amused him vastly. He flung back his head and roared again.

"Truly, O Eric," he spluttered, "that dream is vain. And hard will it be to save thee from old Asgeld; yet, from my love for thee I shall attempt this, knowing that at the last thou wilt choose obeisance to me rather than death. Thinkest thou that Sweyn, twice beaten and broken, may still take Rangarok and save thee?"

I did not answer him, and, after gazing at me for a moment, he made a sudden gesture with his arm, indicating that the conference was ended.

I went back among the guards, but the nobles did not return to the dais.

They were whispering together and watching Harald with furtive looks. And now the sense of brooding tragedy seemed to fill the whole hall and hold everybody in suspense.

Suddenly Harald sprang from his throne again.

"Well, I have talked with Eric the Stranger, the would-be king," he roared in a quick change to scorn. "How of thee, Bjorn, the strong man, the stranger's servant? Hast thou thought that thou and he, with your wiles, could pull from his throne, Harald the Deerfooted, whose crown no man could wrest away, nor shall, till flesh and blood break steel asunder?"

I looked at Bjorn, and saw that the old trance had come upon him. He heard—and yet he did not hear, but seemed to answer as if Harald's words had come from some interior source.

"Aye, lord!" he answered softly, as if speaking to another. "Aye—flesh and blood can conquer steel; and verily, O king, thy rule is done, and nevermore shall Harald the Deerfooted be lord in Rangarok. Behold!"

Suddenly he bent his huge bulk into an arc. There was a convulsion of every muscle; then, with a clash, the ends of the iron chains that bound his arms and legs struck the floor on each side of him. He stood facing Harald, free!

The hall grew still as death. There was not the least movement anywhere.

CHAPTER XXII.

Ralph Seizes the Throne.

THEN I saw Ralph and his men edging toward the dais. And I think it was my warning cry that first broke the intense silence.

Suddenly Ralph leaped forward, with a dozen others, knives in hand, and flung themselves upon the Danish king. Taken by surprise, Harald had hardly turned toward them when they were upon him, stabbing at him viciously in a score of places. Yet even in this mêlée I noticed that Ralph lurked in the background, egging on the others, but himself avoiding the long, flail-like sweep of Harald's arms.

For, though he had no sword, Harald sprang from their grasp with the lithe dexterity that had given him his name. And the would-be murderers recoiled as they felt the knives turn in their hands.

Under his silken robes the old fox wore his armor of steel mesh.

And then began an amazing contest. Harald, alone, with nothing but his fists, was fighting a score, shielding his face from their weapons, receiving no wound, and hurling man after man, stunned, into the assembly hall.

Well planned it had been, for, before his guards could recover from their surprise and rally to his assistance, they had been ringed round by a knot of the conspirators, who drew short poniards from beneath their cloaks and engaged them viciously in overwhelming numbers.

In the great hall arose a wild stampede. A few of Theobald's retainers formed a living wall about Editha and her maidens, and held them against the shelter of the wall, fighting a passage for them toward the door by which I had come.

But it was locked, and they could only hammer hard upon it, and then, helpless to do anything, watch the combat between Harald and Ralph's followers.

It could not last long. Strong though the king was, the odds against him were too great. They dodged under his thrashing arms, and pulled him down like hounds about a stag. He was still fighting furiously, but vainly.

I saw him being bound, and all at once, as if disdaining to struggle

longer, Harald lay still. Meanwhile, and evidently by a prearrangement, the entrance doors had been closed. Ralph's men were herding the crowd back into their places.

Gradually a dreadful hush settled down within the hall. I saw everything as in the crystal of a dream: the great king, breathing hard as he lay helplessly upon the platform, his guards, dead or disarmed and prisoners near by; the frightened girls, with Editha among them, calm amid it all, and looking toward me; Bjorn, still standing amid the tumult like a new Samson, with his broken shackles; lastly the cowering populace, and Ralph's swordsmen, their breastplates gleaming under the torn silk of their concealing robes.

And then, as all eyes turned toward Ralph, he stooped and picked up the iron crown that had fallen from Harald's bead, placed it upon his own, and seated himself in the king's throne.

At the act, whether because of fear or of that reasonless revulsion to which a mob is liable I know not, a roar went up:

"Hail to our king! Hail, Ralph the Anglian, Lord of Anglian Rangarok!"

The hall echoed and reechoed with the cries. Even the disarmed guards cheered and shouted. Those on the dais seemed to go mad with their exuberance; yet I think it was more the idea for which Ralph stood—that of two united races—than Ralph himself that kindled their enthusiasm.

For Dane and Anglian had lived together so long that hardly a man there had not blood of both races in his veins.

Ralph looked toward Harald.

"Raise him!" he said curtly.

They propped the great Dane on his feet, and he stood like an oak before him.

"By right of conquest I claim this land and city," said Ralph. "Dane, what hast thou to say?"

The face of Harald swelled with his passion, but he answered never a word.

"This is a fair land of thine, Harald the Dane," taunted the new ruler. "Methinks that in thy forays thou hast traveled too much to have known it as it is. Otherwise thou couldst not have left Rangarok so often and for so long."

All this in modern English, which, though only I understood, seemed to convey something of its meaning to Harald at least, for he scowled and glared at his supplanter, but answered nothing.

“Now that thou hast more leisure, thou shall see more of thy country, Harald,” continued Ralph. “And thou shall meditate how fair a land it is, and how fair are its maidens, such as she whom thou didst plan to snatch from me.”

And here I might digress to say that, stilted though the language was, it was a fair equivalent of the Danish rendering, and appeared to have been unconsciously adopted by the speaker.

Ralph nodded to four of his men, who came forward, and, taking the ends of the ropes in their hands, began to drag Harald away. He went with them, however, offering no resistance.

Straight down the hall they moved, toward the entrance, and there, the doors having been unlocked again, a band of swordsmen fell into column with them and marched out into the sunlight.

As Harald passed down the hall the crowd was silent, though one or two hissed and spat at him; but from outside there came a sudden outcry that seemed pregnant with grief for Harald’s fall.

Then Ralph was speaking again, but now, to my surprise, in a bastard Anglian which was readily understood. He must have picked up the tongue during his three weeks in Rangarok. And, remembering his genius for languages at college, I was not greatly surprised; for between Anglian and English, except for the pronunciation, there is no great difference.

“Be it known to you, my people,” he said, “that, in taking possession of this land, it is my plan to unite Danes and Anglians under one rule. Wherefore I have cast out Harald, the usurper, and shall restore your own king, Theobald, to his honors, to reign jointly with me. Let him come forward.”

With ashen face and trembling lips old Theobald arose from his corner and approached the dais. It struck me then that the old man must have been so habituated to violence that he had come to regard such scenes as part of his normal life.

Ralph stood up, with that courtesy and ease which I had so loved; even then his act sent a thrill of sad remembrance to my heart. He took the old man by the hand and gently sat him down in the throne beside him.

And now the cry broke out:

“Long live Ralph and Theobald, kings and lords of Rangarok!”

Ralph smiled. His vanity had overcome his uneasiness. Things were going smoothly beyond his hopes.

"Come hither, O Asgeld!" he said. "And thou, Lord Abbot of Rangarok!"

As if they had rehearsed this ceremony—Heaven knows whether they had or no—old Asgeld went forward and stood before the throne; and from Theobald's corner, where a number of the monks were seated, the old abbot also advanced until he and Asgeld were side by side.

"Art thou willing that the two faiths shall continue to be held together in Rangarok?" asked Ralph of Asgeld.

"Aye, my lord king," spluttered the holy Asgeld.

I thought he spoke a little unwillingly, and as if with a secret understanding.

"And thou, lord abbot?"

"We seek not to oppress, but to bring others to the true faith by force of holy living and prayers," answered the abbot in a trembling voice.

"Then," said Ralph, "let it be known that henceforth all who are of the old faith shall be held liable to thee, Asgeld, for any apostasy.

"And likewise with the Christians, my lord abbot. If any turn from thy faith, let him suffer the extreme penalty of the law, unless permission has been sought and obtained."

He looked toward the nobles.

"Let this be my first law," he said, "in order that henceforth no quarrels arise, but that each man and woman in Rangarok be duly registered according to his belief."

"We ratify this law, O king!" cried the assembly.

I was watching him closely. Some deviltry was in his mind—I had no doubt of that. But I could not fathom what his purpose was.

"Now be it known to you," continued Ralph, "that it is my intention to further unite your peoples, to take in marriage Editha, King Theobald's daughter. Let her step here, therefore, and be betrothed to me in accordance with Danish and Anglian ceremony."

Editha came forward from among her maidens. She did not look at me. Dressed all in white, bearing herself royally, but without the least defiance or pride, she approached the dais, curtsying low to Ralph.

"Editha, art thou willing to become my bride and rule Rangarok with me?" he asked.

"I am not willing, my lord," she answered.

And my heart was like a fleet steed, pounding for very joy of freedom.

I saw Ralph's face turn red.

He stood up, facing her, while the whole assembly grew very still.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"I do not love thee, my lord," she answered in a low voice. "And know," she went on more loudly, "that my intention is fixed and cannot be changed."

Ralph smiled, as if he had expected this and had been prepared for it. But there was something deeper than the surface courtesy of the next words; I waited for it.

"Truly," he said, "it is not often that a king sues in vain. But, since Rangarok is now free, and no maiden shall be forced into a marriage against her will, be it known to you people that the Lady Editha shall be free to withdraw from our court, with all her honors, and live where she will, retaining the rank and rights of a princess of the blood."

"That may not be!" shouted a voice among the audience; and I saw the traitor Wolf leap forward with upraised arms. "Hear me, O king!" he shouted.

"Speak, Wolf," said Ralph. "There is none who may not claim audience of me."

"I bind thee, then, by the law that thou hast made, O king," panted the man."For all know that the Lady Editha hath been of the Christian faith since childhood, in spite of the madness that came daily upon her, when she wandered among the Trolls and worshiped at Odin's shrine.

"That was in madness, and counts for nothing. Well, my lord, since her return to Rangarok she hath knelt daily before the shrine of Loki, in the fire-temple yonder."

And at last I saw the meaning of Ralph's scheme, and its beginning and the end he had in purpose.

"Moreover," Wolf continued. "being now sane, as all men know, she still consorteth with Trolls, and engageth in devilish devices, my lord, such as the Trolls use. And it is rumored abroad that she hath sold her soul to the Troll queen, Haggudra, who hath given her in return power and prosperity till death.

"Therefore I denounce her as an apostate from her own faith, and as a sorceress, and demand that she be burned in Loki's fire, according to the law that hath just been promulgated, O king!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Temple of Odin.

UP leaped old Theobald, his fingers working in his rosary.

"It is false!" he screamed, turning his haggard eyes upon Editha, who had not stirred during Wolf's speech. "Never has the Lady Editha profaned herself at Loki's temple."

"If it be true, O Theobald, dost thou accept the law which we made but now?" demanded Ralph.

"Aye!" cried the old king. "Aye; but let the proof be shown."

"What dost thou say, O Lady Editha?" asked Ralph.

"This traitor's words are true," she answered. "Daily, O king, I kneel in Loki's temple, where no woman may enter, save those who have dedicated their lives to the fire-god's service.

"And it is true that I have sold my soul unto Loki, unless before I died Rangarok fall and the day of Odin ends. But why I have done this I will not say."

"And thou knowest, O Lady Editha, the punishment, according to the law that I have made?" asked Ralph, smiling.

"I know it."

Ralph motioned to the lord abbot. He did not mean to spare his victims, and I saw that it was his purpose to carry out the sentence with the maximum of moral suffering. And there went up a sobbing all through the hall as the old monk turned and looked at her, and Theobald, too, their faces working with grief and horror.

At that moment a memory of my readings came to me, and with it the resolve to try a desperate stroke.

"Hear me, O king!" I cried. "There is none who may not claim audience of you, according to your own words."

"Truly, why shouldst thou not speak, Eric the Stranger," he answered, "seeing that thou wilt soon be silent for so long?"

"Then I appeal to Danish law!" I cried. "Whenever a man or woman shall be accused of sorcery, let him have the right to undergo the ordeal by

fire before the penalty of fire. Thus runs the law of Harthaknut, chief of the West Norsemen."

Ralph seemed staggered.

"There exists no such a law in Rangarok!" he cried.

"There is no such law," said Asgeld.

"But there has been that law among the Danes."

"Ages ago, as our wise men tell us, such a law existed. But never within the memory of the oldest has it been enforced."

"And never within the memory of the oldest, has there been burning for witchcraft in Loki's fire!" I cried, hazarding a tremendous guess. "When the cause comes into being, then is the law applied."

And the whole assembly took up my words.

"Let the law be applied!" they shouted. "The ordeal before the burning!"

Old Asgeld hesitated, looked at Ralph, and then smiled very evilly.

"Since the people will have it so, O king," he said, "let the lord abbot make the test and put the Lady Editha to the ordeal of the red-hot stones. And if she cross them unburned, then she is no witch and guiltless of sin.

"But if her foot be even scorched, let her suffer with Bjorn the Ox, and Eric the Stranger this day in Loki's fire."

"It is well answered," said Ralph, rising. "Let the captives be guarded upon the steps of the temple. And when we have dined, let these matters be put to proof."

The guards, at his nod, began to drive the people out of the hall. Behind them went Editha's maidens, sobbing, after them old Theobald with bent head and trembling fingers that played and strayed among his beads, and the lord abbot and the monks. Then, closely guarded, Bjorn and I followed, with the swordsmen clearing a passage.

Outside the flood of sunlight almost blinded me. But presently I began to see that Ralph's plot had been deftly staged.

For there were armed men everywhere, and hardly a single one of the populace to be seen. And all about the temple of Loki were gathered swordsmen in mail.

It looked as if the whole of Rangarok had gone over to the madman. And I knew that our chances, Editha's chances, were infinitesimal.

But what of Harald? What had Ralph done with him?

It was clear that his fate, too, had been prearranged. And he seemed not

to have been included in our own sentence.

Then I saw our guards muttering and pointing upward above Loki's temple, where the sun blazed in the sky. At first I could distinguish nothing.

Then slowly some dark object came into view above the temple dome. It resolved itself into the figure of a man, hanging in chains from the Gothic pinnacle which was the topmost point in Rangarok.

And then I understood the meaning of Ralph's last words to the captive king, and the insane cruelty that had inspired them.

And, as I looked, I saw from the shaking of the chains that Harald lived. So he would live, hanging between earth and heaven, and staring into the sun, and beaten by the winds and rains for many a day, while Ralph reigned under him.

As I halted, the guards hustled me roughly onward. I looked at Bjorn in horror, but his face remained as impassive as ever. We approached the steps leading up to Loki's temple.

I expected that we would be taken inside, but Ralph had evidently made other plans. Bjorn was taken away, and I was led round the base of the rock to a doorway that I had not seen before, leading into a vault beneath the building. My captors thrust me within and locked the door upon me.

At first it seemed pitch-dark inside. I groped my way around the walls, and discovered that the cavern was much smaller than the temple above it; I tried to cross, proceeding cautiously—for fear of some chasm within.

But instead of a chasm I encountered a circular shaft of stone, and after a while I was just able to make out the circular well that I had seen in the temple.

Evidently it ran down through the rock to the cavern, and deeper, into the depths of the earth. I walked around it till a sudden lambent gleam of fire attracted my attention.

Then I saw that all round the shaft, at about the height of my eyes, there was a slit in the stone, through which I could look down on Loki's fire beneath.

I saw the pale flame, whose green-blue glow denoted the presence of many gases. I looked upward, wondering how the sacrifice was to be made in the temple, since the wicker-basket was larger than the well-top, as I think I mentioned before.

And then I saw something else that set me wondering. For the crack in the temple floor, of which I have also spoken, extended straight down

through the masses of rock about the base of the well. But, whereas, in the temple it was no more than a fissure whose edges approximated, here it widened until there was a gap of two feet between edge and edge.

Hard as granite and black as ebony above, it became grayish underneath, until it seemed to take on the glow of the subterranean fires. And suddenly I perceived that it was not hard below, but fluid, and the whole mass seemed to be bubbling and boiling upward.

The peak of Rangarok was a mere crust above a living volcano.

Even the ground on which I stood evinced unmistakable tremors. I wondered whether this was a constant condition or whether some earthquake portended.

I did not remember having felt this trembling within the temple, which, being built on the outcropping of the rock, would hardly yield to that motion of the fluid mass.

The extraordinary formation of the rocks, the nearness of the fluid rocks below, interested me in spite of my situation. I looked down at Loki's fire again.

To my astonishment it seemed much higher in the well than formerly. And, even as I watched it, I saw it climbing. For there was a great stain on the interior of the well, and I saw the little wavelets of fire leap about this and submerge it and ascend and cover it, while the movement under me became more perceptible.

Then, all at once, I understood, and my heart sank. For I had fashioned one of those dreams of freedom that come to desperate men in the anticipation of some convulsion of nature which would set us free. That hope was blasted. For the fire beneath me was a flaming geyser, lava of almost incandescent heat, one of those formations that bubble up periodically at intervals of days, weeks, months, or years. The sacrifice had been appointed for that day because it was the day on which the geyser would make its periodical eruption. So it would not be necessary to lower the basket into Loki's well, too small to admit it. The fire would leap up above the altar and engulf it and its living occupants.

And with the eruption through this safety valve, the tremors would cease, the quake subside, and Rangarok remain safe against Loki's fury.

As I looked upward into the shaft I saw something else that made me wonder.

As I have said, the temple rock was the apex or cone of the volcano,

whose base was the entire citadel. Now I could see, not the hilt, but the point of Odin's sword, thrust aslant clear into the point of the cone in such a manner that its blade seemed to strike the exact center of the great fissure. The cleft was, at the cone, no more than a minute crack, and the sword gave the appearance of not cleaving, but in some way supporting it, as the keystone of an arch.

At that moment a slight sound near me caused me to start. I was almost afraid in the loneliness of the place.

I looked about me. To my horror I saw a hooded figure coming through the broadest part of the fissure. There emerged the figure of an old, bent woman.

The hood was thrown back. I looked into the face of Haggudra, with the young girl's eyes, and the furrows of immeasurable age upon her face.

I confess that I shook with fear. The presence of the abominable old witch was nauseating as a loathsome nightmare. Had Haggudra come to gloat over the sacrifice?

She stood before me, her clawlike hands seeking mine, and the bony framework of her face outstretched toward mine.

"It cannot be!" she muttered. "She cannot escape me now. Listen, Eric the Stranger. By my arts I evaded death; yea, and by long seeking I learned the secret whereby, once a young girl was delivered unto me, I should be able to possess her body at death and sway men as once I swayed Aethelraed, the false Saxon.

"For this cause I gave my soul to Loki, trusting to live on and on eternally in all the beauty that once was mine. I hunger for life, I hunger for the love of men; I, whom all men abhor and fly from. Surely the stones cannot burn her, when I have armed her with the magic of the Trolls!"

I did not catch the meaning of her words at first, nor the drift of her thoughts; but suddenly the wildest hope flashed into my brain. I had read of South Sea Islanders, dervishes, men of all nations, who had gone unscathed through this same ordeal, as if by a miracle—actually because, when hypnotized, their skin acquired insensibility to the momentary heat of fire.

I had even heard it suggested that those who escaped the seemingly impossible ordeal in the Middle Ages had been previously subjected to hypnotism as a preparation. And I was convinced that Editha still remained in the power of Haggudra.

The old crone clawed at me.

“Did you not hear the oath she swore in the Trolls’s mountain?” she whimpered. “By Loki and by Hel she swore to follow Loki’s worship till death, or until Rangarok should fall and Odin perish from the land.

“And in return I gave her life with you, and after death her soul is as the Trolls, which die, and her body shall be mine, that I may become young and fair once more. Fly, then, and save yourself, for she can come to no harm!”

I saw the old devil’s motive clearly now. She was afraid that I was the stranger destined to pull down Rangarok, and that with its fall she would lose Editha forever.

She saw my refusal before I uttered it, and uttered a piercing whistle.

Instantly, in answer to the signal, the Trolls began to swarm up out of the crevice and all about me, like a swarm of rats. They laid their little hands upon me, pulling at me, to force me down.

And now I saw something more: I understood the meaning of Egbert’s words when he said that even if one remained in Rangarok one would come to the Trolls’s city.

I remember that the Trolls, as underground inhabitants, were the hereditary servitors in Loki’s temple. No doubt the passage beneath the rocks ran straight back to their city.

As they pulled at me, turning their wise little faces up toward mine, I saw Haggudra’s eyes fixed steadily on mine. And again I felt the numbing power of the old woman’s spell.

My head whirled. The eyes seemed to become the eyes of Editha. I felt my resistance going from me.

I put forth all my strength of will, until the force of that silent battle of brains weakened me like a wrestling-match.

Slowly the Trolls were dragging me to the edge of the crevice. I looked down, to see a narrow tunnel below me lit by Loki’s fire, now high in the well.

And ever Haggudra’s eyes burned on mine, and in them I seemed to see all that I had ever dreamed of, all the broken hopes of life. The visions drove away reality.

I was a boy again at my mother’s knee. I was at college, and Ralph Wiston was my friend. I was meeting Editha, riding with her—

My foot slipped on the brink, and with a last effort I threw off the hypnotic bonds.

In that instant's tension I fought Haggudra with all the strength of desperation. Suddenly the door of the cave clicked open and two guards appeared. Instantly, like shadows of the night, the Trolls were gone, Haggudra, too, and I was standing, with reeling brain and swimming senses, in a flood of sunshine.

They led me out to the temple steps, and I saw that the whole ground was one mass of people, who, uttering no sound, awaited the outcome of the ordeal.

Then we were within the temple, and now I was able to understand my surroundings and to take cognizance of them.

There was the same packed mob of Danes and Angles, the swordsmen, the priests in their black and red robes, with Asgeld at their head, smiling triumphantly. Opposite him, with head cast down, stood the lord abbot, and by him Theobald, stringing his beads and murmuring his prayers.

Not daring at first to look toward the altar, I let my eyes stray upward. I saw the upraised hands of the two guardian gods supporting the bronze pillar, with the great wickerwork basket above it. I saw the umbrella-knob, by pressure on which the basket would be brought down upon the altar lid.

But the temple roof, which I had thought solidly made, was partly open to the sky, and, looking toward it, I now perceived that the pillar, which seemed to be extensible, ran up to the Gothic pinnacle, and that the figure in chains was attached to this and not to the tapering stone.

I saw the body of Harald, writhing above, and I saw that the same pressure which would bring down the basket would lower the extension until Harald was within the temple, to be the butt of the spectators.

My heart burned at the hellish cruelty of this contrivance. And, gathering courage, I looked down.

The stone lid of the well was in its place, so that the fire could not be seen; and yet I heard it hissing and roaring underneath. And the lid was a glowing red. as asbestos turns in a gas-stove.

And, standing barefooted on a platform beside it, I saw Editha awaiting the torture.

I leaped toward her, but the hands of the guards caught and held me, and hoarse shouts of mirth rang out. I saw the smile on the face of Ralph standing beside Asgeld.

Then a man dealt me a buffet across the face, and as I reeled back I recognized the dastard, Wolf, who had betrayed us.

There was another roar of laughter. There was no mercy in the hearts of Loki's worshipers.

Then I saw something that gave me a gleam of comfort. It was Bjorn, guarded by four swordsmen, and as I looked at him his lips formed a barely perceptible negation. And I saw somebody else—Haggudra, her bent body craned forward behind Ralph.

"Never mind the woman!" she shrieked. "Burn them! Burn them in Loki's fire before they do you harm!

"In my visions I have seen them coming, and though the end was not clear, ye know, O men of Rangarok, that one day your city shall fall—aye, the lordly city in which is your pride.

"Burn them first, O Ralph, king of great Rangarok!"

The old devil was determined that since I would not flee I should be burned and Rangarok saved from destruction.

But the guards pushed her back, and Ralph addressed Editha.

"O lady princess," he said, "think before you undergo this test. For most surely I love you, and would make you my queen. And I, who have made this law, can also unmake it"

"Not so, O king!" screamed Asgeld furiously. "The laws cannot be changed!"

Ralph understood the gesture, if not the words. He hesitated, and then, as if seeking support, turned to old Theobald.

"What say you, fellow ruler?" he asked. "Cannot a law be changed, if it is the king's pleasure?"

And now occurred the most amazing psychological episode of which I have any knowledge. For old Theobald stepped forward, his face working with emotion, and faced Ralph in the attitude of a lawgiver.

"It is not true, O fellow king, that our laws cannot be changed," he said. "Were it otherwise, a bad law would endure forever.

"Nevertheless, among the principles of law which have come down to us from the ancients, there is this: no law may be retroacting in effect, since otherwise laws would lose their legality and become the agencies of rulers' whims and favoritism. Therefore, O Ralph, this new law, which is a bad law, must be repealed instantly."

A shout of joy from among Theobald s followers; scowls from Ralph's and Asgeld.

“But, in the repealing, it must be provided,” continued Theobald. “that the repeal be not retroactive. Therefore, my daughter, the Lady Editha, must undergo the ordeal under the old laws and, should she fail, suffer the penalty laid down by it.”

And he collapsed back into the lord abbot’s arms.

It was the Anglo-Saxon worship of law, carried to the nth power. I knew what his proclamation cost him. And I knew that in his simple, stubborn mind, sooner should Editha die than the law be broken.

“I will not be your queen.” said Editha calmly. “Therefore let the ordeal proceed. since I am ready.”

At that the mob went mad. Ralph, livid with fury, nodded, and two of Asgeld’s priests, who were shod with bronze boots, ascended the platform, one on each side of Editha.

They took her by the hands. I saw Haggudra’s eyes fixed on the girl’s face. Slowly, as if compelled by some unseen power, Editha lifted her head and looked back at the crone.

Next moment the priests and she were walking across the red-hot surface of the stone lid of the well. And Editha moved as if unconscious of the flames beneath, and so, gliding lightly between them, reached the opposite side and descended.

And her feet were neither scorched nor blistered, though little rivulets of solder were running down the priests’ boots, and they began limping and wincing and kicking them off their sandaled feet.

And even the soles of their sandals were scorched and smoking.

There was a hush of terror through the assembly. All had seen the miracle.

Then, breaking through the guards, Haggudra ran forward again.

“Sacrifice them, my lord Ralph!” she shrieked. “Do you not see that Odin is wroth with his people and that he has suffered the God of the Christians to prevail over him?

“Sacrifice them, lest Rangarok fall. I have seen—I have seen in my dreams, and now I know. These are they who are destined to pull Odin from his place unless they die!”

“Let them die now!” roared Ralph, and motioned to one of the priests about Asgeld.

The man ran lightly up the steps of the altar, leaped upon the hands of the

two guardian gods, and pressed the knob of the wicker-basket, which descended slowly by pulleys until it was a foot above the red-hot surface of the lid.

At the same time, by some mechanical process which I did not see, the lid was thrown back. A wave of heated air suffused the space about the well.

And I saw Loki's fire leaping and dancing upon the edge of the altar.

Simultaneously with a creaking sound, the living body of Harald descended through the roof of the temple.

The sound of the clanking chains attracted every one's attention. I stood up.

We saw Harald, bound face downward, looking upon the mob of those who had once obeyed him.

The chains, which had run askew, wrapped him like a mummy, and must have bitten deep into his flesh, but no sound came from his lips in all his agony.

The passion of the Danes burst all its bounds, and I think the very sense of their treachery spurred them on.

"To Loki's fire!" they screamed. "Burn them! Sacrifice them!"

"Aye, if it be not too late," whimpered Haggudra, who had suddenly grown calm. And she watched first myself and then Bjorn, with intense terror upon her face.

Editha, who had left the altar upon the side where Theobald stood, appeared like one in a trance; she watched the proceedings as if she did not know what was happening.

At Ralph's nod two of the guards seized me, and, tipping the basket, hurled me over the edge into the bottom of it.

They stood, holding it aside from the leaping flames, waiting to swing it back across the altar to their comrades, who were holding Bjorn.

What happened next occurred in a moment, I think, though then it seemed an eternity, and that long-drawn-out moment leaves, to this day, an exact and clear-cut picture in my mind of the unchanging faces and immovable postures of the participants, as if a cinematograph film had been arrested, and the shadow-pictures retained their instantaneous poise and gesture.

For Bjorn put out his hands and thrust the guards away. And moving one step forward he placed his two hands on the hilt of the two-handed sword

within the rock.

I saw the muscles upon his body ripple as the surface of a pond under the wind. He stood like a Hercules, feet apart, back bent, feet braced against the base of the well. And then, with a single mighty heave, he pulled out Odin's sword and held the terrific weapon high in the air.

"Thy doom, O king! And the doom of Rangarok!" he said.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The Fire-god.

HAGGUDRA'S piercing shriek rang through the temple. She leaped at me through the unresisting, stupefied guards and, catching the basket's edge, ran with it toward the altar, scrambling up the wicker-work like a monkey, intent on tilting it above the flames.

And as she clung there the sudden swing of the heavy hanging mass, released, carried her, still clinging to it, across the altar. The sudden momentum carried me across with it and tilted me to the temple floor at the feet of Bjorn, who still stood with sword upraised, as the long momentum drew to its conclusion.

But hardly had Bjorn drawn the sword when, with a whistling shriek, a spear of fire, twenty feet high, shot upward. It missed the basket, and I saw Haggudra striving frantically to drop to the ground.

But the basket's movement was irregular and instead of clearing the altar well upon the other side, its direction changed into a circular movement, and it was swinging back toward the altar again.

Into the cauldron of fire Haggudra fell, and in the single scream she uttered I read more than the physical pain and terror of death. It was the shriek of a lost soul: and it rings in my ears to-day as I write of it.

The leaping flames sucked in the withered body, tossed it as if in mockery, one instant, on their lambent surface, and drew it down into the unfathomable depths from which they sprang.

And still Bjorn held the sword aloft and faced Ralph and his men.

Ralph had not stirred.

A quiver ran through the temple, the ground shook, and a second flame rose almost to the temple roof.

Then, with the sound of a thousand thunders, the temple walls were riven and the next moment we were all buried beneath the falling stones.

Whether the sword had really been driven home by some magician-architect of old, to form the keystone of the cone and hold in check the surging gases beneath, or whether it was the long-threatened eruption of the

volcano, Rangarok was no more.

The cone was riven asunder, and a stream of fiery lava poured in a torrent over the fields.

My last act as I fell was to clutch at Editha. Then for a time I heard only the groans of the injured as they struggled beneath the debris, and was only vaguely conscious that some weight pinned me down.

But the walls of the temple had fallen outward. A few survived. Curiously—almost providentially—the one place that remained unbroken was that side of the altar where Theobald and his monks were standing.

I felt hands wrenching away the debris above me, and I was pulled to my feet, to find Bjorn standing over me, and near him Theobald and Editha.

We were upon a little platform of stone, a sort of island in the universal ruin. The temple was gone, and the lava river was flowing on into the heart of the citadel, eating up the grass beneath it as it raced toward the walls.

Under a huge pile of stones near me I saw the flattened form of Wolf, crushed instantly by the fall of the roof.

I drew Editha to me. And as we cowered there, trying to regain our wits, I saw one of the most amazing things of that dreadful day.

For there emerged from among the stones the bloody head and shoulders of a huge man, and then the body and the limbs. I saw that the arms and legs had been bound with chains, which had apparently been broken by the fall. Beneath the blood and the dust I recognized Harald.

Great weals of livid flesh stood out upon his bare arms, so that their shape was hardly human. A chain had bitten into his shoulder, leaving a welt as thick as a sword-belt.

He reached down among the stones and wrenched a broken sword from a dead man’s hand. And, uttering a cry that seemed to fill the air with sound, he ran from the temple.

“Ralph!” I muttered to Bjorn.

As I spoke I looked into the ruins, but he took my head in his hands and turned my face toward the city. And I perceived a knot of swordsmen burst through the flying multitude that scattered like ants when their nest is overthrown, and make toward the walls.

After them ran Harald, more fleet than any runner I had ever seen, roaring and brandishing his broken sword.

Then the mob swallowed them, and I awoke to the full realization of our

position.

The temple was growing hotter every moment, and the leaping flames threatened to engulf us as the wind caught them and blew them toward us.

On three sides of us was the flowing, molten river. There existed still a narrow passage by which we might hope to outrace it to the walls, but it was narrowing every instant that we waited.

Bjorn caught my arm and I took Editha's. The abbot led the trembling old king, and, followed by the band of monks, we ran for safety, just escaping as the streams coalesced behind us.

Hardly had we reached the level surface beneath when, with another roar, a cloud of dust and cinders was hurled up from the broken cone.

"Where are we going?" I managed to gasp to Bjorn, as we ran side by side.

He pointed toward the walls, but did not answer me. And now we saw the fleeing populace again, crossing the bridges and making for the walls beneath.

We reached the upper entrance of the bridge. There was no guard there, and immediately beneath us I saw a long breach in the wall, and near it the charred and overturned hulks of Sweyn's three towers.

But at the foot of the breach was the long battle array of the beseigers, pressing onward in solid column, with shields upraised above their heads, so that they seemed to form a parapet against the rain of arrows that streamed on them.

I saw the Danish archers yield place to the swordsmen. But before the battle closed the mob came streaming through the defenders, forcing them aside by the sheer weight of their impact, breaking their lines and then those of the assailants.

Of necessity the battle paused. Nothing was visible but that fleeing stream, pouring like the lava river across the bridge and into lower Rangarok.

Then I saw a newer turmoil in its midst, and saw Harald emerge, towering above them all. And two men driven to bay turned and faced him, two swords to his one broken one.

One of the pair was Ralph. In the other I recognized old Asgeld, lithe as a boy in spite of his years.

The old priest snatched a shield from a dead man and ran at Harald, thrusting the shield into his face and thrusting upward with the weapon. And I saw Ralph circling behind the unarmed king, trying to strike his sword

home without danger of death.

Harald retreated to the parapet, and his broken blade rang out above the din as it hammered on Asgeld's shield. Their thrusts were too quick for the eye to follow, and I did not know whether the blood that covered Harald's body came from the old wounds or from new ones.

Swift as lightning the great Dane parried the priest's blows, and even found time to turn a threatening sword-edge toward Ralph from time to time.

But from that quarter he had little to fear, for I could see that Ralph's only thought was of flight. But he feared to pass the sword of Harald, and he stood at bay, his great form and long arms covering the sloping ramp.

The last of the mob had streamed past them, and the soldiers, either through fear or because of divided sympathies, stood round and watched the duel passively, while even the besiegers lowered their shields and looked above them, waiting, too.

Asgeld recoiled a pace, and then, uttering a wild cry, loosed the shield from his arm with a sudden, adroit movement, and, hurling it in Harald's face, rushed at him with his sword uplifted.

But, swifter still, Harald stepped aside, and the shield went clanging down into the foss beneath. Then, with an upward movement of his broken weapon which the eye could not follow, he clove Asgeld's sword-hand from the arm as the blade descended.

The hand, still clenching the sword, continued on its downward flight and struck the parapet of the bridge. Aye, and so strong was the blow that the sword-point became embedded there, and stood upright, with the severed hand still clutching it.

Then, with a roar, Harald sprang forward and wrenched Ralph's sword from him. And, grasping the two men, one in either arm, he began to sway to and fro.

Slowly Asgeld's feet and Ralph's left the ground. Their writhing bodies were helpless as those of insects in Harald's clasp.

Ralph screamed as he divined the purpose of his enemy, but no cry came from old Asgeld's lips. Higher and higher still the mad king raised them, till he held them at the extremity of either arm.

Then, putting all his strength into the act, he swung them together round him and hurled them from the parapet.

The writhing, twisting bodies fell together, whirling in an arc like a Roman wheel and plunged in lifeless masses of broken, quivering flesh upon

the rocks, five hundred feet beneath the bridge.

All this time, neither the defenders nor the besiegers had stirred. But at the sight of Harald's herculean feat, a roar of enthusiasm went up, and the men-at-arms of the garrison gathered about their king.

And still more fiercely the storming party swept up through the breach and upon the bridge.

At first the turn of the spiral shielded them; then they came to the straight upward curve of the bridge, and here the two forces met. In front of the long column of shields I saw Sweyn's, with the two ships, and my heart leaped up in thankfulness that he lived.

I was about to run forward, heedless of my peril, I believe. I wanted to run between the contestants and bid them put their weapons away, since Dane and Angle might now live peacefully together, and there was nothing more to war for.

But as I did so, again there came the roar of an explosion. The slender bridge swung like a spider's web, twisted on its upper supports, and hung askew over the abyss, sending the combatants sprawling.

Simultaneously I saw great gaps appear in the house-fronts, the roof of the palace fell with a mighty crash, and a great cloud of cinders half veiled the sun.

Suddenly the molten stream appeared between the buildings of the rocking colleges, and began to pour in a hissing, smoking torrent down into the depths below.

Happily it missed the bridge, on which the fighters, heedless of the catastrophe, continued their sanguinary battle. Now I saw Harald among his men, rallying them.

With an impetuous rush, the Danes bore back the Saxons to the bottom of the bridge, back to the very breach in the walls.

It was a pitiful sight to see the struggling mass recoil, at the moment of victory, before the unconquered Harald; and yet my admiration of the man grew with each moment that I watched the two ships on Sweyn's shield sink back and back like the apex of a receding wave.

How long would the senseless murder last?

They were fighting on the lowest section of the bridge, and another rush of the Angles bore back the Danes, All over the breach the combat was developing, as more and more men rushed up from either side to the crucial battle-place. And while they struggled to and fro, inchoate forms in the

murky haze, Rangarok was slipping into ruin above them and they knew nothing of it!

Suddenly the end came. For, with a louder roar than any, the whole front of the stone masonry, into which the upper bridge was anchored, collapsed into the foss, carrying the bridge with it.

For just a moment the wonderful spirals seemed to uncoil as a rope that is thrown. And the swarming figures at the lower end were like flies on a hawser.

Then the whole bridge crashed into irretrievable ruin beneath, half filling the deep foss, and tossing up stones and bodies by the impact of the shock, as a wave plays with the debris of the seashore.

Half the attacking force—all the Danes—had gone to instant death. No, not quite all, for, on the walls beneath me, above the breach, I saw Harald at bay, sword still in hand and shield on high, facing Sweyn's men alone.

Sweyn leaped forward, but not to battle. He lowered his shield, and, at the recognized signal for parley, Harald forbore to strike. For a moment the two stood there together. Then I saw Sweyn withdraw to the foot of the breach, and knew that Harald had refused his offer.

A moment's pause, and then Sweyn was upon him, at the head of his men. I saw the great sword hew a circle about him as Harald fought his last fight for Rangarok. I saw Sweyn fall, and his men draw back, irresolute.

I saw the archers bend their bows, to accomplish what the swordsmen had tried to do and failed. And then the unexpected happened.

For, before the first dart had left its bended bow, Harald had torn off his armor, flung shield away, and, sword in hand, had leaped from the wall into the city below.

A leap of five and twenty feet it was, even there, where the high wall was broken. A leap into an armed camp, with dead lying thicker than autumn leaves, and the living armed to do battle; and into a hostile city, its people hidden within their homes in fear, but buzzing at every window.

Harald alighted on his feet, as agilely as a cat might have done, and began a race across the open and down the long street of Rangarok at a speed swifter than I had believed possible in man.

No wonder that he was called the deer-footed!

The swordsmen, taken by surprise, struck at him and missed him, the archers' shafts, shot on the venture, passed him unharmed. Already he had gained the central street behind the besiegers' camp, and was running on, a

lonely figure, toward the lower walls.

Then, to my intense joy, I saw Sweyn emerge from among his men, mount the breach hastily, and fit an arrow, turning the point toward the fugitive, still not more than fifty paces away. Swifter than I could see the taut bowstring grew slack.

I saw a flicker of dust a foot in front of Harald's running feet.

The Danes groaned in dismay, but Sweyn was already fitting another arrow. Again the bow twanged, and I saw the dust fly from the ground at Harald's side.

Once more, and the last shot! The helmet of the fugitive fell from his head and toppled into the road. And, still unharmed, Harald continued on his course.

Horsemen were galloping in pursuit of him, but he outdistanced them, leaving the fleetest steeds toiling hopelessly behind.

Presently I heard wild shouting about the gates of the lower city; and then, incredible as it seems even now, I saw Harald beyond them and running into open country, a tiny figure alone, with the horsemen toiling vainly after him.

Then, as if a curtain had fallen upon that scene, I remembered Editha beside me. And, standing alone with her, among the ruined buildings upon the broken crest of Rangarok, I took her into my arms.

We were happy there, with all the old evil ended, and the dread bargain with the Troll witch ended with the fall of the Norsemen's gods. We forgot everything for a long time, until the sound of tumultuous cheering made me start and release her.

The Angles had swarmed into the citadel by the unbroken bridge, and had gathered round me, cheering in that solid Anglo-Saxon fashion that always sent a thrill to my heart. Yet I smiled at the tribute; it seemed so little after Editha.

Suddenly I perceived that they were not cheering me after all, but Bjorn near me.

And, after the first wince of humiliation, I understood that this must needs be, and that it was better so. For Bjorn had pulled the sword from the rock and fulfilled the old prophecy; and I guessed, though he had never told me, that this was the vision which had driven him northward to Rangarok.

The lord abbot came forward and placed a gold circlet on his brow. But he doffed it and placed it on the head of old Theobald.

"Harken, ye folk of Rangarok!" he cried with a sudden passion that I had never seen in him before. "This day the old wrongs are ended, and Dane and Angle shall live as one folk in peace together. And all the thought that ye have heretofore given to war ye shall henceforward give to the arts of peace.

"Thus, when you have become strong, and have learned the wisdom of the other folk from the teachers whom I shall bring to you, the gates of the ice shall be opened, and you shall mingle with the other folk as your forefathers did, and learn that all men are brothers.

"But until Theobald's death, which may our God avert for many a year, he shall reign, and I shall rule under him."

Suddenly he swung about and faced a band of Asgeld's priests who were standing upon the outskirts of the crowd which had assembled.

"But know ye," he cried with a look of stern resolve upon his face, "that from henceforward, as Odin is dead, so Odin's worship ceases. For the old gods are dead, and their last stronghold has fallen, and henceforth the true faith prevails—the faith of the Angle's god.

"And he who will not follow this faith and swear to worship Odin no more, shall be placed aboard a ship and cast upon the waters beyond the ice—and there let Odin protect him!"

At this there was a buzzing among the crowd; and then, after a few moments of discussion, two by two, Loki's and Odin's priests came forward and, kneeling at the lord abbot's feet, accepted his faith forever.

Then Bjorn saw me and came to me, and would have spoken of me again to the crowd, but I restrained him. I marveled at the new majesty of the man, who seemed to wear his honors so naturally that he did not even think it necessary to explain to me how he had come to oust me.

And how strange it was that, of we three, the third and least had risen to leadership! How all my plans had gone a glimmering! And yet I was unfeignedly glad.

"Eric," said Bjorn, "you shall teach the people—"

I shook my head.

"You forget, Bjorn," I said, "that I have both won something dearer to me than life, here in Rangarok, and also lost something that was once the dearest thing to me."

For already the memory of the Ralph Wiston whom I had known was creeping back, ousting the picture of the madman. I could hardly see Bjorn's face for the mist before my eyes.

"You plan to return to America?" Bjorn asked.

"With your leave," I answered.

"Eric," he said, clapping me on the shoulder, "you are the truest and strangest man that I have ever known. A wise man and a humble one, a brave man, and a shrinking one, a strong man who does not know his powers.

"I would give all but my crown for you to stay and lead my people. Nevertheless, where the heart is, there must one be. Go, then, if you must, Eric, my friend, and God be with you and the Lady Editha!"

Sweyn had come up and joined us, all bloody and stained, with a great dent in his helm, made by Harald's sword. He listened in silence to our conversation, which he readily understood.

"There is one thing more to be done before I go," I said to Bjorn.

"Aye, and quickly," he answered, scowling. "There can be no peace in Rangarok while Harald lives, for he would ever gather new bands about him and lead them to plunder."

Now I became conscious of that old admiration for the old Danish king that made my heart go out in a sudden wave of pity for him.

"Let there be no more bloodshed, Bjorn," I said. "The old order is gone forever. Let Harald live, and be ruler under you, over his own people."

"That cannot be," he answered. "Harald must die, that no more harm come to this land."

"I shall ask his life as a last boon, as my parting gift, Bjorn," I told him.

"The one boon that I cannot grant even to you, Eric," he answered.

The implacable nature of his resolve amazed me still more. What a nature had lain concealed beneath the placid, gentle surface of our old follower!

It was almost as if he had cast off a slough from his soul, and newly awakened. And yet, despondent as his words made me, I caught a sudden gleam of hope from the look upon Sweyn's face.

"Sweyn," I said, "Bjorn was with you upon the walls when you shot at Harald. Now you are the cunningest archer in all Rangarok, and yet you aimed three times and missed him. Was it ill fortune that unnerved your hand?"

"Nay, Eric," he answered, smiling sheepishly.

"You could have pierced him?"

"Verily, my friend," he answered, "never yet has Sweyn shot at a mark

within an arrow's flight and missed by ill adventure. I could not bring my heart to kill the bravest, strongest, fleetest man in Rangarok."

"And Bjorn?" I asked, trembling with eagerness.

"He said, 'Well done,'" said Sweyn.

CHAPTER XXV.

Rangarok Sails to Meet Harald.

NEWS of Harald's activities was not slow in reaching us. We learned within a brief period that he had withdrawn to his own stronghold in the outer isles, from which he was already harrying the shores with his fleet of thirty ships and the band of two thousand men whom he had gathered about him.

And what decided Bjorn that an immediate attack on him was imperative, was the growth of a new legend about the ex-king. He was looked on as invincible, as the representative of the old gods whose worship he had sworn to restore. And he had secret followers even in Rangarok.

So the next month passed in preparations for war. We had a fleet of about as many ships as Harald, and these had to be fitted with new sails and overhauled; also provisions had to be secured, with all the equipment for that naval battle which it was evident must take place before we could attack Harald's stronghold.

By now it was almost the beginning of winter. The sun shone for only three or four hours daily, describing a low arc in the southern sky.

Many advised that our operations should be postponed till spring, but Bjorn and Sweyn were resolved to strike the last bow quickly.

In the end it was a body of three thousand men, trained to sea service, that marched out from Rangarok. Editha clung to me in tears; the parting, after we had endured so much, was almost unbearable.

"In two weeks we shall return," I told her," and then, according to our plans, we shall set sail together for home."

For we, too, could not wait for spring.

"Home!" she repeated. And, in my selfishness, I believe I had not thought till then that Rangarok was home to Editha.

"O Eric," she said, still holding me. "though we are not yet as man and wife, nor shall be until the day we sail, hast thou forgotten the old custom whereby the women followed their lords to battle?"

I laughed and kissed her again, and turned away with an aching heart that I tried in vain to hide.

But she still held me.

"Eric," she said, "if thou shouldst not return, I should still bear with life if—if—"

"If what?" I asked, patting her arm.

"If we were married first," she answered shyly.

That was on the evening before our departure. And, although the wedding had been planned to be a public one, I was struck with Editha's plea, and had a talk with the abbot.

I learned that, as in the old days, two marriage ceremonies were customary, at intervals of a few weeks: the first, the betrothal, however, was considered valid and sufficing for every purpose. And so, since this was law in Rangarok, and hence would be recognized in all countries, Editha and I were married very quietly, an hour later, in the cathedral, in the presence only of Theobald, Bjorn, and Sweyn, and a few chosen friends, including the faithful Egbert, who was to accompany the expedition as my servant.

Here I might mention that Egbert, being only half Troll, had cast in his lot with us; and, indeed, many of the little folks already had been baptized and discarded the old, cruel faith forever.

So I bade Editha farewell at the palace door, since we were to leave before daybreak, and it was necessary to get all the sleep possible. We started at dawn, in a bitter snow-storm, and by the next morning reached the shore, where we found our fleet drawn up in the harbor.

The prospect was discouraging in the extreme. The pack ice, driven southward by the gales, was now invisible, and all about us foamed a turbulent sea, which made even embarkation hazardous.

However, by noon all was in readiness. Our plan was to skirt the coast, following a well-marked route, mostly well within sight of land, until, after two days, we reached the archipelago in which Harald was wont to foray.

Bjorn took command of the king's boat, a lengthy craft with two masts, having a gilt dolphin on the prow, and manned by a hundred oarsmen. I was in charge of one of the columns of ten ships, Sweyn having the other, while Bjorn was to lead his ten as the van.

The plan was to break Harald's formation by bearing down in three parallel lines; after that it would be each ship for herself, in the ancient fashion of Danish warfare.

Rather solemnly, since we should not see each other face to face again until after the fight—if then—Bjorn, Sweyn, and I bade one another farewell.

But as Bjorn was entering his boat Sweyn turned to me and said:

"At Dreenadel, our sally-port, Bjorn holds a surprise for you. Eric."

He said no more than that, and at the time I paid scant attention to his words.

For all my attention was concentrated upon the ten ships which I commanded—nominally, of course, since I knew little of sea-fighting. Even my own twenty oarsmen were men from the maritime districts, whom I had never seen, as well as half my fighting force of fifty archers and swordsmen.

And, indeed, while most of these were veterans, accustomed to sea warfare, there were several youths, obviously unfit for service, more than one of whom was soon taken with the qualms of sea-sickness as we pursued our way through the heaving waters.

With Bjorn's ten ships abreast in line, and Sweyn's following, and mine bringing up the rear—a straggling formation, much broken up by wind and sea—we left the port behind and started on our course toward Harald's stronghold.

And all that day we tossed and tumbled in the seas, rounding bleak headland after headland, until, at nightfall, which was early-afternoon, we left the shore on our lee, and passed into tranquil waters, stilled by the protection of the ice-pack to the west of us.

All the day I had been busy exercising the men and making preparations. Toward midnight I went below for a brief sleep.

I had instructed Egbert to arouse me when Sirius rose, which would be, in that latitude, in early morning. When he awakened me I saw him standing looking very wistfully at me.

"What is it, Egbert?" I asked him.

"My lord remembers that first meeting of ours in the strange city ruled by the witan?"

"Aye, Egbert."

"And how his servant told him that he should forebear to follow what his heart urged him, for through it there would come bitter sorrows? Doth my lord remember now?"

"I remember, Egbert."

"Hath my lord felt them?"

"Deep sorrow and great joy," I answered.

"Yea, I have given my lord that which was destined for him. Now my

task is all but accomplished, and the long journey to witanland was not made in vain. But if my lord win free through this battle, wherein great surprises await him, let him not return to Rangarok."

"Why not?" I asked in wonder.

The dwarf shook his head, pursing up his lips in the strange manner of the Trolls.

"In adversity," he said, "a king is as a brother. In prosperity, beware of him, for even a brother thirsteth for power and will bear no rival. Let my lord therefore make his way straight back to his own land, and see Rangarok no more."

"You speak foolishly, Egbert," I answered. "Shall I leave the Lady Editha in Rangarok?"

"Yea, my lord," he answered.

And my question, which I had meant as purely rhetorical, he answered as if from knowledge. I felt a growing alarm.

"You mean that I shall never return to her, Egbert?" I cried.

"I said not that, my lord, but that you will not return to Rangarok till you have returned to your own country."

And that was all I could get out of him.

Soon after I went on deck, and we maneuvered through hours of darkness until, about ten in the morning, the dim twilight disclosed the open sea without a sign of land, or of Bjorn's or Sweyn's ships.

I called my navigator, an old Anglian sailor, and questioned him, but he made light of the matter.

"Within two hours," he said, "we shall sight the rim of the peninsula that divides this sea into two halves. There are two courses, on either side of it, uniting again beyond, where the archipelago begins. Doubtless the other vessels have taken the starboard course, and we shall find them awaiting us at Dreenadel, our destination, until which point is reached there is no danger of any attack."

Surely enough, about noon we saw land, and then, far to the starboard, I could make out the dim shapes of the other vessels, wallowing in the rising waves.

We lost them off the edge of the peninsula, and, since it would have meant delay to have altered our course, we took the lee side and drove on under an increasing gale.

Before darkness fell we were flying through the foaming waters, lashed by a bitter wind. I placed the men on half-hour watches, which was all they could endure without becoming frozen.

The hoar frost settled upon the decks and spars, and the waves that drove aboard over the high sides had lashes of steel.

The ponderous tiller, which was controllable against the fury of the wind only through its being set in a semicircular groove, with notches in which it could be locked, hardly responded to the touch. We were driving a course dangerously near the edge of the distant ice-pack to avoid the risk of going ashore, and the ships behind us trod almost on each other's heels to keep together.

There were no lights by which to guide our way—nothing but an occasional straggling star and that sense of the north that is inherent in old sailors. The navigator, wrapped in furs, sat all night beside the man at the tiller, directing him.

I myself took the tiller about midnight, dismissing the sailor who had been at it. He was a boy of about twenty years, one of those whom I had marked as useless for fighting purposes, and, as I looked at his slight form and heard his teeth chattering beneath the hood that almost covered his face. I ordered him sternly below for the remainder of the night.

He hesitated, and looked at me, as if about to speak.

"Go below!" I cried sharply. "Do you not understand an order?"

He turned and limped away. For two hours I kept the tiller, until there was no longer any sensation in my hands.

Then I yielded it to the navigator, and so the night passed, and at last the second sunrise disclosed the distant coast, and the open waters of the archipelago beyond the headland.

Here, where the water was calmer, we expected to find the two other divisions of the fleet. And, just beneath the promontory, I saw a little port—Dreenadel, as the navigator told me.

However, it was impossible to approach it, owing to the state of the sea. In fact the rounding of the headland was itself a perilous undertaking, for the winds buffeted us toward the shore, and, in the end, we almost grazed the last rocks before reaching open water.

And at Dreenadel was my surprise. For, as we passed within three cables' length of it, I saw, anchored snugly off shore, and apparently none the worse for her adventures, my yacht, the Editha.

But my wonder and joy were turned to horror in a moment, for, at the mast-heads, there hung two things which were hardly recognizable as human bodies, owing to the tight rawhide that encased them.

There was no need to wonder: they were the bodies of two of the mutineers.

I turned away, to find Egbert beside me.

"Our Lord Bjorn's gift to my Lord Eric," he said.

"How did the ship come here?" I demanded.

"Be it known," he answered, "that upon my lord's arrival orders were sent to the coast to make the fairway of the ice and discover by what means he had reached Rangarok.

"Thereupon this ship was found, disabled, they say, by the storms. And for a week and more these men were held, awaiting King Harald's pleasure.

"But when our Lord Bjorn ruled, he sent orders that they should die in the old fashion, because they mutinied against my lord. And this, too, is Bjorn's gift."

I shuddered in horror; Bjorn's nature was developing fast. Again I thought of Egbert's warning and prophecy that I should not return to Rangarok.

And I had no wish to do so, for the bloodstained city was fast becoming an abomination to me.

We rounded the point and, in the distance, saw a fleet of ships, drawn up in battle-array, and making slowly toward a distant island.

It was impossible to decrease the distance between us, and the vessels were only dark spots against the sun; so we kept on our course.

Gradually the haze lifted. The short day had broken with the promise of that fine, mild weather that sometimes comes in early winter even in those latitudes.

Upon a distant cliff I could just discern something that looked like a squat lighthouse.

"Harald's stronghold!" said Egbert, who still stood by me, pointing toward it. "It is fortunate that the storm did not divide us, for it would be dangerous for our ten ships to be caught alone by Harald's fleet in these waters."

I thought so, too, and was resolved to take no risk. At the stroke of the gong the men-at-arms came tumbling up on deck, putting on their mail and

helmets as they ran. The archers put new strings to their bows and began testing their arrows.

The men with the grappling-irons took up their posts; the oarsmen began to divest themselves of their furs and, in their underclothes of warm wool, balanced themselves in their places on either side of the keelson, ready to respond to the calls of the navigator on deck.

By now the distant shore was plainly discernible, and Harald's tower, keeping guard above it. I was watching the ships anxiously.

It was impossible to discern their immediate objective as they tacked, but they seemed to be directing their course toward the castle without awaiting us.

Beside me the navigator and Egbert watched eagerly, too, and I heard excited comments from the archers grouped near us on the poop.

And I was sure that the same unspoken thought was running in their minds, that ran in mine—suppose that these are Harald's ships!

But as the sun began the slow curve of his arc, to my relief the vessels, as if sighting us, put about and came toward us. I counted the twenty. All had survived the storm, then. I could make out the leader, larger than the rest, which should contain Bjorn.

They came on, still black between us and the sun, keeping an even line, and gradually extending until they began to overlap us at the ends. They were about a mile and a half distant, I judged, but still not readily distinguishable on account of the haze that rolled up from the surface of the ocean, when suddenly the navigator shouted, ran forward on the poop, and stood with his hand shading his eyes, at the same time peering out across the sea, his body bent forward, his whole attitude tense as a bulldog's.

At the same moment Egbert, at my side, gave a shrill shriek and danced in dismay, waving his long arms frantically over his body, and pointing to the oncoming ships.

"Harald's war-fleet!" he shouted.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The Battle of the Ships.

AT once the archers took their stations, and the men-at-arms withdrew to their posts behind the pent-house that protected them from hostile missiles, till they were needed in the fight. Meanwhile, I issued orders to put about and attempt to make the other side of the peninsula, in order to meet Bjorn's ships.

The vessel curved round in a wash of foam, those behind us, not at first understanding the maneuver, straggling out to starboard and lee of us, and losing all formation. And they never made it again.

For we were setting against the wind, while Harald's ships came on with the wind behind them, their full sails swelling and their bows cutting clean through the waves. It was soon manifest that unless Bjorn was already at hand we should never make the other channel.

With our flank turned toward Harald, we offered the position of the greatest possible area to his fire. It did not take me long to see that our only hope was to maintain our fighting formation and await Bjorn's coming, rather than attempt to join him.

We had five signal-flags, and I hoisted the one ordering full speed ahead in line. But our ships were tumbling and wallowing all about us, and Harald's were now less than a mile away, coming on in an encircling formation, the best for the archers, and already on three side of us.

The wind was increasing again, it was beginning to snow, and there was a steady drift of the pack-ice toward us. The advance floes were already grating beneath our keels.

I looked alternately across the headland, already disappearing in the sea-fog, and toward Harald's ships.

"My lord," said a voice beside me timidly.

I looked, to see the boy whom I had ordered from the wheel.

"You cannot fight," I said to him sternly, noting that the armor which he had put on was loose, and the straps twisted. "Go below and remain there!"

But he only grasped me by the arm. "Steer straight for Harald's ship!" he

cried. “If you sink him his men, who are dissatisfied with outlawry, may yield. It is the only chance!”

Sound sense! I looked at him for a moment curiously, but he had hurried away to obey my order, and I gave the order to the navigator.

Already Harald was within a half-knot of us. Through the murk I could discern his vessel clearly. It was larger than Bjorn’s, that is to say, perhaps twice the size of mine.

The rowers were pulling in perfect unison, and the added momentum sent the great vessel dashing through the water toward mine, and at about twice the speed. A dragon, with throat agape, grinned on his prow.

Now I could make out Harald himself, in his coat of linked steel, grasping his great two-handed sword and waving it aloft toward us.

Behind him stood his men-at-arms, dauntlessly exposing themselves. Behind them, on a raised platform, were his archers.

There was no chance to maneuver. Straight toward the oncoming ship we drove, and, at my command, my bowmen loosed their arrows.

The flight struck truly, and a dozen of Harald’s men toppled to the decks. But Harald was uninjured, and I heard his deep-throated roar as the ships dashed toward each other.

At the same time a cloud of arrows came from Harald’s ship, and from the ship on either side of us, now closing in. Half my men were gone in an instant, dyeing the deck with their blood.

A dart quivered in my wrist. I plucked it out, not feeling the pain, and saw the boy standing at my side once more.

And suddenly I gave a great gasp of dismay, for he had thrown back his hood, and I recognized—Editha!

I cried out, all unnerved for the fight. I drew her to me, and for a moment she nestled in my arms. She raised her head.

“Forgive me, Eric!” she whispered. “I could not stay without thee. Egbert brought me, in the guise of a man-at-arms.”

And now I knew what the dwarf had meant by the great surprises of which he had spoken.

Then, as we stood there together, with the arrows flying round us, I gathered all my wits and thrust Editha behind the penthouse.

The ships crashed together. Our prow glanced off the heavy walls of Harald’s, but his struck us fairly, and instantly I was swept off my feet by the

force of the blow.

The ship careened over. There was a rush of water all about me.

"Grapple and board!"

I shouted the order above the din of the dashing swordsmen.

The grappling-irons were flung, but Harald's men were already aboard us, and the grapplers were cut down.

I saw the ex-king above me, rushing on at the head of his mail-clad men. He passed over me.

I stretched out my arms and found Editha.

I rose, holding her. Midships our men were resisting, and Harald, like a fury, was sweeping his great sword about his head, and hardly yielding place to his own followers.

Although I did not consciously observe it, I remembered afterward seeing our nine other ships scudding in all directions, each with a brace of Harald's bulldogs at her heels. And then I saw Bjorn's fleet, just rounding the point of the peninsula by the other channel.

Harald's men were shouting.

"Back, my lord!" they cried. "We are sinking!"

I heard the cries above the noise of battle. We were foundering under the seas that poured through the gap in our sides. Grating against us, held by the iron grappling-hooks, Harald's ship plunged like a tied and frightened horse.

Of all our men not one remained to oppose Harald's, though many wounded lay about the decks. Turning, Harald saw me with Editha, and, snorting with rage, rushed toward us.

I parried his first blow. The second struck the sword from my hand.

Harald raised his for the third stroke, aiming it at my head. Then something like a great dog ran between his legs and tripped him.

It was the dwarf, Egbert, and, as Harald went down, he ran to his side, shouting in his ear.

Harald rose slowly, glaring wildly at us, his sword raised undecidedly. One of his men thrust: his sword went home into the dwarf's body, and the wise little old man tumbled to my feet.

"Farewell, my lord! Thus I have served you!" he whimpered, and stiffened out like a great hound, and died.

I was waist-deep in water. If Harald hesitated out of uncertainty of mind, whether to cut me down or not, the sinking ship was his answer.

He bellowed to his men, and, catching Editha in his arms, leaped to his own deck, while two of his swordsmen seized me and almost hurled me aboard.

Hardly had we gained Harald's ship when mine turned over and sank immediately, carrying down her freight of dead.

And now I saw our scattered, helpless ships, some tossing helpless upon the waves, some sinking, while on all sides Harald's rode the waves triumphantly.

Then for the first time Harald became aware of the approach of Bjorn's vessels. I watched them as they came on in a sort of apathy. They were outnumbered, and it was useless to match anything but equal numbers against the Dane's force of seasoned sea-fighters.

In fact, though Bjorn had expected to meet Harald on sea, the large force of three thousand had been for the purpose of assuring incontestable superiority by land, if we should be fortunate enough to be able to make our landing on Harald's island without encountering opposition.

Leaving Editha and myself for the moment, Harald bellowed an order, and at once his men were scurrying to and fro, signaling to his vessels. The great ship put slowly about, turning to meet Bjorn, while his fleet, with more alacrity than mine had shown, began falling into line.

Bjorn was about three miles away, and the short day was drawing to a dose. And now I perceived that, while we had fought, the ice had been closing in about us.

There was a space of clear water for perhaps a mile behind us, and in front of us was open sea: but the floes, drifting in along shore, were threatening to cut off Harald's retreat.

And I noticed now that Bjorn, instead of continuing to bear down on us, was directing his course toward the coast, with the evident object of cutting off Harald and assaulting his stronghold, with the ice barrier behind him.

Harald saw his danger, and put about once more. Now the Danish ships were racing toward the shore, gradually approaching Bjorn's at an angle; and it was impossible to hazard which would be the first to arrive.

Harald came back to us. His eyes were alight with triumph, his lips were wolfish.

"Hail. Eric the Stranger!" he shouted in bitter mirth. "Hadst thou not wits enough to keep thy head out of the bear's mouth, thou who didst refuse to rule under me, and perchance after me?"

I did not answer him, but held Editha more closely, counting each moment with her as the most precious of all things.

"Why didst thou serve Bjorn, once thine own servant, and wouldst not serve me?" he demanded.

"It matters nothing, O Harald," I answered. "Do with me now as you will."

"Aye, as I served Ralph the traitor!" he roared. "It is not good for traitors to play false with Harald."

He glared and frowned at me, looking from me to Editha, and playing with his sword. Suddenly he burst out:

"By Odin, still I know not what to make of thee. Thou dost not plead for life?"

"No; there are greater boons," I said.

He clapped his great hand on my shoulder with the gesture of one who has suddenly made up his mind.

"Hark, Eric!" he roared in my ear. "I have no grudge against thee, for the bitterness I felt when thou didst overcome me in the lists hath passed away with this victory of mine.

"I do not understand thee, Eric, for thou has beaten me in one fair fight, and yet art neither seaman nor soldier; what manner of man thou art, with thy high soul and low bearing, I cannot discern.

"Yet the matter is a simple one: thou must die, and speedily, for reasons of statecraft, since I can neither bind thee to me nor be sure that thou wilt not supplant me.

"Therefore, bid farewell to this lady of mine, who hath followed thee in love. Of that I make nothing, since women are lighter than water, and soon she shall be mine.

"Be with her for an hour, and then prepare to die by Harald's sword. Before Bjorn come upon me, thou shall taste death—an honorable death; giving thee entrance to the Valhalla of heroes.

"And there, perchance, Harald shall join thee when his day is done, and have the leisure to understand thee. For I love thee, Eric, as a man might love his brother."

There was something touching and chivalrous in the old lion's words.

Harald left me with Editha upon the deck, and strode off to command his men; but for long I could not bring myself to speak to her, and only held her

to me, while the wintry day drew to its close, and the scene about me stamped itself upon my brain with the greater clarity in that my observance of it was wholly a subconscious one.

The floes were all about us. We were gradually approaching Bjorn's fleet on our diagonal courses, but his leading vessel was still as much as a mile away, and it was a dubious, three-sided race for vantage between Harald, Bjorn, and the ice.

The pack was moving along shore both from the island channel, which came into view behind Harald's castle, and from the ocean. Bjorn and Harald were each racing to make the open passage to the land before these two armies of ice-floes came together.

At first I thought the luck would be with Harald. But, in spite of the old pirate's seamanship, seen in the splendid laying of his course, Bjorn had the advantage of position.

Our ships were now in line, as his were, but we were half a mile behind him as his own ship took the channel, shot through the black water, and glided into the calm sea beyond.

Ship after ship, Bjorn's fleet followed. I saw Harald rage in despair as Bjorn went through; and, as the last of Bjorn's ships took the fairway, along a passage now hardly wider than a canal, and not more than two hundred feet ahead, he seized a bow from a bowman and loosed a shaft.

It fell short and hissed into the sea, and Bjorn's last ship joined her companions in the harbor of Harald's island.

I saw fear upon the faces of Harald's men. I knew the omen of the short shot—the worst that could have befallen.

Harald's situation was now a desperate one. Either he must drive through the fairway the few ships that could make the passage before the ice closed, and give battle with half his forces, at a disadvantage, or he must remain cut off from his own territory and see his stronghold taken and his lands ravaged and plundered.

He chose the former course. He took the tiller from the man who held it, and drove hard for the narrowing passage.

The ice walls drew together. For a moment the ship heaved and rocked in the struggle; and then, with a shock that thrilled her timbers, she struck.

The floes caught her and held her. The passage closed.

Looking back, I saw that the ice was closing fast about the other ships of Harald's squadron as well.

And the ice-army that drifted in from the sea was flinging out a long line of skirmishers between Bjorn and the shore. In fact, both fleets were caught, and the advantage was not one of position, but of fighting men.

In spite of the destruction of my squadron. Bjorn still had the greater numbers; but I had little doubt that Harald's prowess and that of his veterans would win the day.

Bjorn and Sweyn had realized the situation, and already their men were leaping over the sides of their ships upon the rocking ice, which, even as I watched, grew firm as solid ground beneath their feet.

Harald's men, needing no order, trained as they were in many an encounter of this nature, were also clambering over their ships' sides and gathering for the fray.

It would be a short and bloody one, I thought, for it was already twilight; but I should not know the issue. Harald was coming back toward me, and I knew that my end was at hand.

"Editha, dear," I said, "this was fated from the first, and this is the end. I loved thee. Think of that always.

"Better if I had never seen thee, but remember that. Promise me this: wed Harald if he wins, for win he must.

"Rule him, and, through him, rule those under him. And wipe away this bloodshed from the land. Promise me!"

I stretched out my hands to her in the impassioned appeal of a man about to die. I saw Harald halt a few feet distant.

He seemed to be struggling with himself; I believed he hated the task to which he had set himself, but it was not likely the old ruler would let a passing fancy stand between himself and his policy.

I saw him unsheath his sword. I saw the Danes about him, looking on with wonder at the strange spectacle of their king hesitating to despatch a victim.

I do not know what answer Editha would have made to my appeal. I have never asked her; I do not want to know.

For, while she waited, as I stood before her with my hands outstretched, I saw a look of amazement, wonder, fear come upon Harald's face. He strode toward me. and seized my hand in his sword-hand.

"Where didst thou get that ring?" be thundered.

It was my mother's ring—gold, with a single ruby, with the name of

Leontieff engraved on it in Russian characters. Since my mother's death it had never left my finger.

"It was my mother's." I told him.

"Where is she?"

"Dead—happily dead." I said, overcome by the remembrance of her.

He grasped me by the shoulders, staring into my face as if he would devour it, scanning my every feature. A groan broke from his lips. He let my hands fall.

"Would to God I had known before! Thank God I know now!" be moaned. "I am thy father, Alexei Leontieff!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

Bjorn Rules in Rangarok.

ONLY his bodyguard now remained about him. His swordsmen and the archers had already taken up their position, and, five hundred feet away, Bjorn was marshaling the last ranks of his men.

Everything was in readiness for that last, murderous battle in the dark, so useless, yet inevitable. Already the archers on either side were testing the distance by random shots toward each other.

But Harald leaped from his ship like a madman and broke through his fighting ranks. He strode in front of them.

"Come hither, Bjorn. and parley!" he shouted.

Bjorn strode toward him, his mail clanking about him.

"Aye, I know thee, old fox!" he called. "There can be no parley with such as thee. Before the moon rises there shall be one king, not two, over Rangarok."

"Let it be thou, Bjorn!" answered Harald.

"As thou sayest," said Bjorn, turning.

"I yield me, Bjorn!"

Bjorn's voice was keen with sarcasm as he replied:

"Harald Deerfoot they called thee in olden time, but Harald the Fox is what the common people say to-day, for truly, Harald, craft and not prowess, wins thee thy victories. Here is no council-chamber, but a fair field for valor to be tested!"

"Come hither, O Eric, my son, and speak with Bjorn for me," cried the old Dane to me.

I hastened to obey him, and, at the sight of me, whom he had believed dead, Bjorn started. I saw Sweyn stride forward from his men and come to Bjorn's side.

"If this be Eric," called Bjorn to Harald, "let him advance with thee and speak with me."

So we two went forward and, at a distance of twenty paces, Harald unsheathed his sword and cast it behind him, in the Danish manner.

Bjorn and Sweyn did likewise; then, recognizing me, Sweyn ran forward and took my hands in a firm clasp that moved me deeply.

"What sayest thou, Harald?" asked Bjorn.

"This is my son, O Bjorn," said the old king. "Long have I dreamed of such a one to rule after me. Now let us make a treaty, that there be no more fighting, and thou shalt rule in Rangarok, and I in my dominions. And after thee, let Eric come to the crown."

"Fair words, Harald, but what of thee?" asked Bjorn.

As they spoke the men on either side, overcome with curiosity at the strange sight, and having heard Harald's offer to yield, had gradually pressed forward until they now stood in a circle about us. Their ranks intermingled.

And because there was no enmity among them, and many were kin. and almost all knew each other; and because Harald's outlaws sought gladly the chance to yield, in a few moments Bjorn had gained a bloodless, victory, for Harald's forces had already begun to merge themselves with Bjorn's,

Before Harald could answer, he had appraised the situation.

"Freedom for my men," he answered.

"Aye, but of thee I asked," said Bjorn.

"I am content to rule in my island, I am weary of war, Bjorn. For the sight of my son, and the remembrance of other days unnerves me."

"Aye, Harald, but already the strength thou hadst is gone, and it is for me, and not for thee, to make the terms of peace."

And Harald looked, about him, to see himself surrounded by Bjorn's swordsmen.

"Then let me die fighting!" he roared, groping for his sword in the empty scabbard.

"Nay, why should more lives be taken?" asked Bjorn quietly.

He made a motion with his hand, and a dozen men flung themselves upon the old king. Harald made no resistance. Within a few minutes he was a captive in Bjorn's ship, and Harald's own vessels were in our hands.

It was a bitter argument that arose later about the council-table in Bjorn's vessel, Sweyn pleading for Harald, together with myself, and Bjorn obstinately opposing.

"Enough blood has been shed," said Sweyn.

"Aye, Sweyn. But more will be shed unless he dies. The old fox may be stirred by the discovery of his son.

"A life of war and plunder leaves little taste for quiet rule. And what is in the blood must come out in the blood!"

He glanced askance at me as he spoke, and with dismay I realized that his suspicions were already turning against me.

So we talked to and fro, Bjorn growing more obstinate, and yet, I could see, reluctant to execute his own decision. And then our argument was interrupted by the appearance of Editha.

She had asked and received permission to visit Harald, and now came quietly up to the table.

"Listen to a woman's words, my Lord Bjorn," she said. "It hath been in my mind to crave the boon that Eric and I shall not return to Rangarok, but shall take ship at Dreenadel, aboard his own vessel, and leave for the land in which he dwells.

"Let Harald come with us, for it is his wish to return to the land from which he came. Thus his death may be averted, and, there shall be no more bloodshed.

"What sayest thou, Eric?" asked Bjorn.

"I am willing," I answered.

"Let it be so," he answered. But I knew that Bjorn would never yield to any man's will again, once his kingship was firmly established.

And I knew that it was the thought of disposing of two rival claimants to the throne—Editha and myself—rather than of mercy, which inspired his decision.

So, two days later, when a change of wind opened the ice-way, we set sail for Dreenadel. There, having cut down the ghastly trophies at the mast-heads, and given them reverent burial, Editha and I and Harald took ship, manned by three of Bjorn's most skillful seamen.

They were to convey us, under sail, through the ice passage to within sight of the most northern port of call in Norway, returning in one of their long-boats, which we carried on board.

Bjorn softened toward the end, as he bade farewell to us upon the deck of the Editha.

"A strange journey, Eric, my friend," he said, "with an unexpected ending. Nevertheless, believe that the Norns willed this. Be happy with her for whom thou didst come, and forget Rangarok.

"Let Harald forget, too, for, if he sets foot upon our shores again, surely

he shall pay the penalty with his life."

Sweyn embraced me. "Come back some day, Eric," he whispered in my ear. "Surely I shall not die without seeing thee again!"

"Some day—perhaps, O Sweyn." I answered.

And my eyes were full of tears as I stood beside Editha upon the deck and watched the receding shore.

We made the passage of the ice and entered the Arctic Sea, speeding southward with a favorable wind.

Those days were the happiest of all my life. Each hour with Editha was a revelation to me. I had never known a woman's companionship since my mother's death, and I had never known what I bad missed.

We talked a great deal about our plans. At first it seemed to me that Editha would never be able to adjust herself to modern life, but, since human nature is everywhere the same, I came to realize that it was only the externals of life that would demand adjustment.

I resolved to settle for a while in some small place on the outskirts of civilization—perhaps in the Northwest—while Editha learned modern English and picked up the ways of the people. Thence the transition would be comparatively easy.

Harald approved this plan. We talked a great deal of the future. Since Russia was no longer his home—indeed, during his years in Rangarok he had almost forgotten his native tongue we decided he should live with us for the remainder of his days.

He told me things about my mother, too, that almost made me forget the wrong he had done her.

But still I wondered whether, after the wild life in Rangarok, he would be able to adjust himself to our civilization.

It was on the third night of our voyage. Leontieff—as he was to be called—was pacing the deck with me, and we had talked for hours of the future.

"Eric," he said, "I have not found you to lose you again. We will make our home together, and I shall try to atone for the wrongs I have done you and those over whom I ruled.

"The past seems like a dream to me—a feverish dream, sometimes, but, nevertheless, a nightmare, out of which I have awakened.

"I am going to spend the night on deck and fight it out, as a man must fight with the wild beasts of his past. Good night, and God bless you!"

Those were the last words I heard from his lips, for I was aroused at dawn by one of our seamen, who drew me on deck, shouting incoherently and pointing.

The long-boat was gone. Leontieff was gone, with the two others. The sun shone over a wilderness of water, but nowhere was there any sign of a boat upon it.

For at last, the ties of a lifetime had proved too strong to be broken; and Harald had gone back to Rangarok to fight for his empire.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I WAS BORN of an ultra-respectable English family inhabiting a solid middle-class district of London, and seemed destined from birth to pass through a public school and university, go to the Bar, and end my days as a high legal luminary.

There had never been any erratic character in our family, with the exception of an ancestor who served as interpreter to Napoleon, and is reputed to have spoken every language in Europe. I don't know whether it was some atavistic prompting that induced me to cut short my scholastic career and go to South Africa. But in any case, that was what I did.

I spent several years there, wandering through the length and breadth of the sub-continent, from Cape Town to the Zambezi, finally getting into the newspaper game in Johannesburg. It was through this newspaper work that I discovered I had the writing instinct.

This seemed to indicate America as my logical goal, and I made my way to New York, trying my hand at newspaper work, then joining the staff of a magazine, and finally beginning to sell to the magazines.

My first efforts were directed toward the highbrow magazines, but, even when successful, I was always working in a difficult medium. I could never understand why action was considered low, and, with Shakespeare and almost every other accepted writer on my side in this argument, I was delighted when I found myself able to crash *All-Story* and *Argosy,* through the kindly interest of the godfather of so many writers in this country, that revered and almost legendary character, Bob Davis.

Victor Rousseau

This success enabled me to leave New York, and I spent the next four years among the *habitants* of Canada, seeing a good deal of the country, and writing mostly of it. Some fifteen of my serials in the Munsey magazines were subsequently published in book form in England. I have published a few highbrow novels for the fun of it (average sales, 300 copies), but I get more fun out of writing the straight adventure story than from anything else.

Am at present living in Toronto, but regard this more as a jumping-off place than anything else, and am looking forward to extensive new travels as soon as circumstances permit.

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